

'We are proof discordant couples can thrive'

Luke Ssemwogerere lives with HIV/Aids, while Prossy Nakalema doesn't. Faced with fear, stigma, and uncertainty, they chose commitment over separation, showing how love, informed choices, and support can make a discordant relationship work.

BY ELVIS BASUDD KYEYUNE

Prossy Nakalema, 36, and her husband, Luke Ssemwogerere, 40, have been married for 11 years. However, six years into their marriage, their lives were turned upside down by a diagnosis that would challenge even the strongest bonds.

It started subtly. Ssemwogerere, a photographer in Kampala, began to experience frequent illness. A persistent cough lingered, his energy diminished, and even simple tasks became exhausting. The couple hoped it was a temporary issue, but tests revealed the unthinkable: Ssemwogerere was diagnosed with HIV.

Terrified

"I was terrified," he recalls. "Not for myself, but for Prossy. How do you tell someone you love that you carry a virus that could change everything?"

For days, he hesitated to share the news. Every time he tried to speak, words failed him. Finally, gathering his courage, he told his wife. The moment was filled with fear, tears, and uncertainty. Nakalema sat silently, absorbing the weight of his words.

After the initial shock, Nakalema took an HIV test herself and received a negative result. Relief mingled with disbelief. Six months later, another test confirmed she was still negative.

A year later, the result was the same. Time after time, the tests showed that Nakalema and Ssemwogerere were in what doctors refer to as a discordant relationship, with one partner being HIV-positive and the other negative.

Understanding discordance

For Nakalema and Ssemwogerere, the medical explanations they received would soon become part of their daily lives.

"HIV discordance is real," explains Dr Anthony Sematimba from Njeru Health Centre in Buikwe District.

"Several factors determine why one partner remains uninfected: genetics, the type of HIV, the stage of infection in the positive partner, the presence of other sexually transmitted diseases, and even circumcision, which research indicates may reduce the risk of infection."

Globally, the number of discordant couples is on the rise. According to the World Health Organisation (WHO), many HIV transmissions occur when the positive partner has a high CD4 count but is not receiving anti-retroviral therapy (ART). Studies show that more than 50 percent of new transmissions in couples are not genetically linked, suggesting that infections can occur from outside the primary partnership.

WHO now recommends ART for all HIV-positive patients with a CD4 count below 500 cells/mm and for those in relationships with an HIV-negative partner, regardless of CD4 count. The principle is straightforward: if the virus is suppressed, the risk of transmission is extremely low.

In Uganda, nearly six percent of couples are discordant, although many are unaware of their status. Testing remains low, particularly among men, even when women are tested during antenatal visits.

"About 80 percent of men, including those who are already positive, do not know their status," says Dr Sematimba.

For many people, discordance can lead to the end of relationships.

THE BIGGER PICTURE

Statistics reveal the realities faced by discordant couples in Uganda. HIV prevalence among adults aged 15-49 is around six percent, with 1.4 million adults and children living with the virus. Married couples account for 66 percent of new infections, underscoring the importance of testing and education.

Yet stories such as Nakalema and Ssemwogerere's offer hope. They show that with love, commitment, education, and support, discordant couples can not only survive but thrive, building families and futures together.

"There is a tendency for the negative partner to leave," says Robinah Nanyonga, a counsellor at the Aids Information Centre (AIC).

"Fear, stigma, and misinformation make it difficult to stay." However, Nakalema chose a different path.

"Abandoning Luke never crossed my mind," she says. "We had two children and had built too much together. I had to support him."

The couple made challenging but intentional choices. They decided to abstain from unprotected sex and committed to consistent condom use. They also sought counselling to manage their fears, guilt, and the new realities of their lives.

"I remember one night," Nakalema recalls. "Luke was extremely ill, weak, and confused. I stayed awake, holding his hand and telling him everything would be okay. At that moment, I realised that love is not just about the good times; it is also about weathering the storms together."

Counselling, community

Counselling plays a crucial role in

helping discordant couples cope with their situation. In 2012, AIC established the Couple Club, a support network specifically for these couples. "We observed that ongoing counselling, reminders, and encouragement for regular testing help couples understand that being discordant does not mean permanent immunity," says Nanyonga.

The club also addresses emotional challenges that may arise, such as blame, regret, and even threats of separation or violence when couples first learn of their discordant status. "Many couples initially think the test results are wrong," Nanyonga adds.

"They may not immediately understand the importance of protecting the negative partner or how to manage their future plans, including having children safely."

The support system encourages couples to adopt strategies that protect the negative partner while allowing the positive partner to lead a fulfilling life. Some couples even choose to legalise their marriages after counselling, feeling reassured that they can live together safely and happily.

Living with discordance

For Nakalema and Ssemwogerere, their journey has been centred on both education and love. They adhere to antiretroviral therapy (ART), attend regular testing, and maintain open communication.

They have learnt that staying informed, following medical guidance, and providing emotional support to each other is vital for thriving.

"Love is paramount," says Ssemwogerere. "But understanding, patience, and commitment are just as important. HIV is part of our lives, yes, but it does not define us."

Nakalema adds, "It is possible to love someone with HIV without fear. What truly matters is the history, the bond, and the family we have created. That is what keeps us going."



Together Against All Odds: Prossy Nakalema and Luke Ssemwogerere's love has stood strong through HIV, proving that courage, care, and commitment can conquer fear. PHOTO/ COURTESY OF COUPLE