How to Strike at the Heart of HIV Stigma and Celebrate All Forms of Love

With its annual letter, the International AIDS Society launches a campaign calling out stigma and discrimination.

February 14, 2019 By Trent Straube

It's February 14, and the International AIDS Society (IAS) has a lovely Valentine's Day gift for you. It just posted its annual letter, the theme of which is "Getting to the Heart of Stigma." The letter serves as a launching point for a new campaign to fight HIV-related stigma.

The campaign includes personal stories, graphics and slogans, which you are encouraged to share on social media, along with your own stories, using the hashtag #HeartofStigma. Images and sample tweets and posts are available via a digital tool kit here.

> "We must start the difficult conversations, take action when we bear witness to a stigmatizing incident, and hold ourselves to higher and more inclusive standards." https://t.co/Km5q72pIuo @iasociety #HeartofStigma #UequalsU pic.twitter.com/hjuxTNGfNh
>
> — Bruce Richman (@BR999) February 14, 2019

Meanwhile, the IAS annual letter spells out the nuances and dangers of stigma—plus concrete ways to battle it. Below are excerpted paragraphs from the letter, along with sample graphics and texts from the campaign and ways people have used them. But be sure to scroll through the full text of the 2019 letter. Consider it a Valentine's treat for yourself!

Since the beginnings of the HIV epidemic, there has been a tendency to conflate stigma and discrimination. However, while the two are related, they are also distinct. Stigma is a social

phenomenon that elevates certain groups over others and steadily devalues entire groups of people.

Stigma can appear in a number of ways. Most notably, external factors can generate and reinforce stigma. These factors include: pre-existing prejudice based on gender, race, sexuality or economic position; unfounded fear of HIV. The impact of stigma can also be intensely personal and internalized: individuals may feel ashamed, dirty or afraid, withdrawing from social situations and isolating themselves from others.

Yet, looking back on the past three decades of the epidemic, hope remains: HIV also gave rise to resilience, spirit and determination. So how do we, the HIV community – people whose lives are touched by HIV professionally or personally, who are living with HIV, who are vulnerable to HIV or who know someone affected by HIV – move beyond rhetoric to action in getting to the heart of stigma?



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[Part 1/2] “I am Susan Shumba, lesbian and human rights activist with a passion for promoting the rights of LGBTI persons and people living with HIV. In November 2018, when my sexuality was exposed to my church leaders, I was beaten-up by the church members. They believed they were cleansing me from the

demon of homosexuality. I was ashamed as I was called names, so I left the church. But I keep fighting because my mother taught me to be whoever I want regardless of background or culture." – Susan Shumba, Zimbabwe, IAS Member and IAS 2017 Youth Ambassador *** To help get to the #HeartofStigma, we are sharing personal stories from people in all shapes and sizes regardless of social or economic standing, gender or sexual preference, geographic background or skin colour. This Valentine's Day, let's remind the world of the importance of celebrating all forms of love. Learn more from our newly released Annual Letter. Link in bio. *** #valentinesday #loveislove #lgbt #lgbtrights #hiv #stigma #plhiv #sharethelove #transrightsarehumanrights #zimbabwe #IASONEVOICE

A post shared by International AIDS Society (@iasociety) on Feb 14, 2019 at 5:30am PST

As efforts have intensified to address discrimination, the concrete manifestations of stigma, the underlying values and attitudes that embody stigma have remained.... The picture is especially serious for key populations— gay and other men who have sex with men, people who inject drugs, sex workers and transgender communities—in many parts of the world. We've recently seen mass arrests of gay men in Indonesia and the forced closure of service sites tailored specifically for key populations in Tanzania. Rising and continued violence against trans people is a stain on the global conscience. The risk for people who inject drugs to acquire HIV is 22 times higher than for the general population. In fact, since 2016, the Government of the Philippines' concerted campaign against people who use drugs has reportedly resulted in more than 12,000 deaths. Of the 195 countries in the world today, only 24 permit same-sex marriage. In short, misconceived laws that criminalize people most vulnerable to HIV and people living with HIV all too frequently perpetuate a dangerous cycle of incarceration, infection and prejudice which reinforces stigma.

Stigma limits our ability to respond effectively to HIV. The evidence is clear: people who fear being stigmatized or discriminated against are less likely to seek an HIV test and to adhere to treatment.



View this post on Instagram

The early days of the HIV epidemic gave rise to two epidemics: one that was viral in nature and another composed of fear, loathing and blame. Three decades into the epidemic, it remains clear: HIV and AIDS doesn’t discriminate; People do. #HeartofStigma #Valentinesday #IAS2019

A post shared by Tyler (@topchinbunchorn) on Feb 14, 2019 at 7:34am PST

Today, the timing is opportune to launch an urgent new effort to change public perception as scientific evidence has definitively demonstrated that people living with HIV who achieve viral suppression cannot transmit the virus to others.

The Prevention Access Campaign, a global health equity community, launched the Undetectable = Untransmittable (U=U) initiative, which signifies that individuals with HIV who receive antiretroviral therapy and have achieved and maintained an undetectable viral load cannot sexually transmit the virus to others. While the powerful U=U movement has resounded within the HIV community and throughout the global health field, it has yet to be embraced as a standard by the general public. Now is the time to change that. This emerging evidence thoroughly undercuts the fears that often rest at the heart of HIV stigma.

If we hope not only to minimize the effects of HIV stigma but also to eliminate stigma at its source, we’ll need more than catchy slogans. We’ll need to apply proven social science and community mobilization techniques to transform public perceptions and attitudes about people living with or affected by HIV. We must understand and effectively address stigma and muster the political commitment that will be required.

View this post on Instagram

[Part 1/3] “My name is Jay Mulucha. I am a transman who is happily engaged with my partner. I am also the Executive Director of Fem Alliance Uganda and an athlete. As well as playing basketball, I also manage and coach a basketball team in Uganda. After finishing high school, where I performed well, my mum could no longer support my university education. But because I was good at what I was doing, I was spotted and given a scholarship to play basketball at the university in Uganda. I started my studies, played basketball for the team, and was happy. Then one day I was approached by my coach who told me that the university administration was complaining about me. This happened after I appeared in the media when David Kato, a Ugandan LGBT activist, was murdered. The media showed a group of gay people, including me, at his funeral. This was when I fully came out to the public. For this reason, the university administration complained that I was gay and asked me to leave the team, saying that I am going to spoil the team and that they cannot continue providing me financial support to stay at the university. I was

thrown out, unable to complete my education simply because of who I am." – Jay Mulucha, Uganda, IAS Member *** To help get to the #HeartofStigma, we are sharing personal stories from people in all shapes and sizes regardless of social or economic standing, gender or sexual preference, geographic background or skin colour. This Valentine's Day, let's remind the world of the importance of celebrating all forms of love. Learn more from our newly released Annual Letter. Link in bio. *** #HeartofStigma #valentinesday #loveislove #lgbt #lgbtrights #basketball #stigma #sharethelove #genderequality #transrights #transrightsarehumanrights #uganda #IASONEVOICE

A post shared by International AIDS Society (@iasociety) on Feb 14, 2019 at 8:01am PST

We must start the difficult conversations, take action when we bear witness to a stigmatizing incident, and hold ourselves to higher and more inclusive moral standards. And we'll need a renewed commitment to accountability and honesty. We must be willing to call out and directly confront those countries—as well as colleagues, family members and friends—whose actions perpetuate HIV stigma and contribute to the further spread of HIV.

The fact remains that we will never "end AIDS" until we end stigma. At this perilous moment, when the most basic of human values seem to be in retreat, the HIV community must show the world a different path.

Together, we can all change the narratives that fuel HIV-related stigma. Starting this #ValentinesDay, take part in getting to the #HeartofStigma to remind the world to celebrate all forms of love https://t.co/QJj4Tkw6xv #LoveisLove pic.twitter.com/B1egSRK3ZS

— Int. AIDS Society (@iasociety) February 14, 2019

The full letter includes more data, along with concrete steps to eliminate stigma. Start fighting stigma in your own community today by sharing the sample tweets below:

> Let’s dedicate this #ValentinesDay to remind the world the importance of celebrating all forms of love http://ow.ly/Fwo530nFsYG #LoveIsLove #HeartofStigma

> “What we are seeing in the case of #HIV-related stigma is mirrored more generally in the world’s seeming retreat on #HumanRights.” http://ow.ly/Fwo530nFsYG #HeartofStigma

> “We all have to change our attitudes. Female #SexWorkers are human beings just like you and I, they also need care just like you and I.” - Loveness Gunda, @iasociety Me and My Healthcare Provider Champion http://ow.ly/Fwo530nFsYG #HeartofStigma

And here are two sample Facebook posts:

> “We must start the difficult conversations, take action when we bear witness to a stigmatizing incident, and hold ourselves to higher and more inclusive standards.” The International AIDS Society’s Annual Letter calls out the underlying core of HIV: stigma. #HeartofStigma

> “HIV and AIDS doesn’t discriminate; people do.” This #ValentinesDay, the International AIDS Society’s Annual Letter strikes at the #HeartofStigma to remind the world of the importance of celebrating all forms of love.

Let’s dedicate this #ValentinesDay to remind the world the importance of celebrating all forms of love https://t.co/DMLBEzBiDv #LoveIsLove #HeartofStigma pic.twitter.com/3sJ7pTnI44

— SF AIDS Foundation (@SFAIDSFound) February 14, 2019

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