

## **Tracey Niekerk**



**Based: Cape Town**

**Tracey Niekerk** - found out she was HIV+ in 2001 - Working mother, wife and motivational speaker.

**More about Tracy:**

So much has happened since doing the diary project.

My eldest son just turned 11 years old on 9 November 2011, and my youngest son was turned 5 on 20 June 2011.

Yes you might wonder, how come two sons. Well since being diagnosed as being HIV positive in September 2001, I thought I might never be able to have another child and I was happy with God granting me a healthy son even though he was also HIV positive.

But since I was divorced and still living with my ex-husband, we decided to consider having another child. Yes there were risks involved and it was something we really needed to think long and hard about.

What would we do if this child was also HIV positive?

How would I cope knowing what I have done?

Could I handle having another child that was HIV positive and accept the consequences?

After speaking to my doctor, he advised me that it is a very risky decision but he would support me 100% should I go ahead with it. He advised me that both myself and my partner's CD4 should be high enough and our viral load low enough to try for another baby with minimal risk of the child becoming infected. Having been employed at Metropolitan Health, and having the support of the HIV department at hand, I was advised once I fell pregnant that I would go on medication to reduce the risk of transmission from mother to child.

I started taking medication during my second trimester of the pregnancy, and then got very ill in February 2006 and ended up in hospital for 3 days with Jaundice and enlarged



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liver, only to discover I was allergic to the medication I was taking. The gynecologist immediately changed my medication and I was good to go.

On 20 June 2006 I gave birth to a healthy baby boy weighing 3.620 kg's. My decision was not to breastfeed as I did not want to take that risk, so my son was bottle fed from day one. He also started taking medication for the first 6 weeks and after both tests came back negative, he stopped taking medication.

They say a child born with HIV has a lifespan of 5 years, but my eldest son is 11 already and is doing extremely well. I was told 2 years ago, that he needed to start taking treatment as his CD4 count was decreasing and his viral load was increasing. This was a real shock to me and it really hit home what was happening in my life. I cried and prayed because I asked - is this the end? Is this how my son's life is going to end? But with all the support from his pediatrician and my family, I was told to have faith and as long as I do my best to keep him healthy, there is nothing more I can do. It was all in God's hands now.

I knew what it was like having to start treatment because myself and my partner started treatment the year before and lucky for us we had no side effects besides a slight rash which was something we both could handle. But just the thought of my little boy having to be on medication for the rest of his life, was sad.

But then again, how many other children with chronic conditions has to take medication on a daily basis, so this was just another obstacle we needed to overcome as a family.

Since he was born, every year he has a huge birthday party and he is spoil rotten. Yes like every child he gets disciplined and he is forced to work hard at school.

When he started treatment, the doctor told him why he needed to take medication on a daily basis and that he needed to go for blood tests now every month for the next 3 months. That was the hardest thing for me because I don't like seeing him having to go through having a needle stuck in his arm. He kicks and screams and wants to know why he has to go through all this and not his baby brother. We took him to see a psychologist initially and he was made to understand what was going on in his body. Not long after that I was called to his school because he had sneezed on one of his classmates and started to cry and said that his friend should worry because he won't get HIV. The school didn't know about this so I had to go and explain what was wrong with my son. The school said it was fine and they would make sure that he would not be victimized. Because it is compulsory to go to the school camp, I had to write a note and put all his medication in separate packets and mark it for the days he needed to take it.

He has gotten use to the fact that he is HIV positive and that he only has to share this information with people if it is really necessary. Since August this year, he's been doing so well that he's medication has changed from taking 4 tablets in the morning and 4 tablets at night to just 2 tablets at night. His pediatrician is extremely happy with his progress.

Just to keep me sane, I decided to have my youngest son tested as well this year. Just to put my mind at rest. The results came back negative. I was told by my doctor that I am putting myself under unnecessary stress doing this. The only time I need to take him for a test is if I feel that he has been exposed to the virus.

I on the other hand have also been doing well.

The thing I hate the most is if you go to a doctor for something and you tell them that you are HIV positive, they automatically think that whatever illness you have, it is because of being HIV positive.

If I have the flu, I am told it is because my immune system is weak due to my condition. If I have sinus, I am told it is due to my condition. I had carpal tunnel release surgery at the end of June this year, and the nurses ask you before surgery if you are taking any medication and what is it for. When they hear that you are HIV positive, it is like they should never have asked that question in the first place because now they don't know what to write on the chart. They feel more uncomfortable than what I feel.

Meeting people for the first time and I mention to them that I am HIV positive, they cannot believe it. The first thing they ask me is why I look so normal. Am I not supposed to look sick? To be quite honest, I have never met anyone so far that looks different to healthy looking people even though they are HIV positive. This condition has opened my eyes to so many different things in life. This is a condition that I control. It doesn't control me. I have my days when I am down, but then I think of other people that are worse off than me so I shouldn't be worried about anything. People might not be HIV positive but they have lots more going on in their lives compared to me.

I have met so many people that have inspired me and that I have inspired because of my life. If only people didn't think of HIV as a disease, we would have more people open up about their status. HIV positive people should just think that it is another medical condition that can be controlled by the right medication and taking care of yourself.

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CK2010/00285/23