

The Face of Stigma

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“Health is defined as a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity.”

- World Health Organization (WHO), 1948

For years the public observed a mystery disease, the “skinny disease,” cripple the bodies and lives of millions worldwide, as researchers worked tirelessly to find answers. The development of antiretroviral (ARV) drugs was the first glimpse of hope in fighting the death sentence that was HIV/AIDS. The effective combination of these drugs through standard antiretroviral therapy (ART) did in fact prove to be the answer, as medical reports show encouraging numbers of patients partaking in ART to have a virus load deemed undetectable.

The warranted enthusiasm that comes with this breakthrough, however, often leads people to believe the fight against HIV/AIDS has been won, and the only remaining issue is getting this medication into the hands of everyone in need, which albeit is no small task. While one can readily see the effects untreated HIV/AIDS is capable of having on one’s body, it is harder to identify the myriad of mental health battles one living with HIV also faces. Scientists were able to identify the physical characteristics of the disease and successfully produce treatment to combat the physical ailments. The same process must be done for mental health issues associated with the disease: first identify the problem, then address it.

## **Identifying the Problem**

Stigma.

The first part of this process has already been completed. Researchers and common people alike can agree on the existence of stigma, particularly surrounding HIV/AIDS. While other illnesses such as cancer are received with nothing but sympathy and love for the innocent patient impacted, HIV/AIDS receives nothing of the sort. Because those infected with HIV are not born with the disease and perhaps due to the sexual component involved in transmission of the disease, people grant themselves the authority to attach a moral component to HIV. Some even go as far as to say those living with HIV deserve the disease for their careless behavior.

Clearly understanding the existence of such complexities that exist within HIV/AIDS globally, Maria de Bruyn committed her life to helping unravel these dense facets that make up the disease. This medical anthropologist traveled around the world researching and collecting different pieces to the puzzle of HIV/AIDS. The significant amount of work dealing with stigma and discrimination corroborates the severity of the problem. The mental impact of such inhumane discrimination is undeniable.

## Addressing the Problem

While the existence of stigma is readily agreed upon, the solution of how to fix this destructive problem is not.

Because of de Bruyn's collaboration with UNAIDS, her collection was able to present insight on what they thought could be impactful on fighting stigma. One official poster from 2003 reads: "These are some of the most painful symptoms of HIV and AIDS. Help us fight fear, shame, ignorance and injustice worldwide. Live and let live." Surrounding these words are the faces of a diverse population that make of those whom perpetuate stigma, with a quote of his/her harmful words, such as "You disgust me." While traditionally stories of those living with HIV/AIDS have been shared in hopes of getting the population to hear their perspective and realize the harm of their actions, UNAIDS took a unique approach with this poster to instead recognize, or "call out" rather, the faces of those discriminating. Perhaps this alternative approach to fighting stigma surrounding HIV/AIDS will have a greater impact.

Recognizing the potential of this approach, McKenzie Richards decided to take this poster one step further. Inspired by Tom Phillips's *A Humument*, Richards aims to "treat" this preexisting piece by distorting and adding original content, in hopes of creating a powerful piece to fight stigma today.

After reading all of the quotes paired with the pictures, a few common themes were identified. Many of those discriminating seemed to be basing their judgment on false information, such as modes of transmission and life expectancy. A number of people, for example, spoke of not wanting to physically be near someone living with HIV/AIDS. In order to address this irrational concern, a fact about transmission of the disease was placed on top of the pictures and connected to enlarged pictures of faces in order to directly combat their statement. In a similar fashion, facts about life expectancy and consequences of stigma were placed on the poster and directly connected to respective discriminators. A red tint was also added to the poster in order to draw attention to the strong presence of AIDS that still exists.

Ultimately, Richards worked to help further fight stigma through education. As many people discriminate out of fear and ignorance, it is important to provide facts to eliminate the credibility behind any form of stigma. We must continue working together to find effective solutions for ending stigma surrounding HIV/AIDS.

## Works Cited

Discrimination and Stigmatization, Folder 6, Box 19. 2003. Maria de Bruyn papers. David M. Rubenstein Rare Book & Manuscript Library. Duke University, Durham, NC. 20 Nov 2017. (MLA)