

How you talk and ask about #HIV matters

especially on a popular television show

On the Oct 1, 2014 episode of [@VH1's @CouplesTherapy5](#), the public initially learns about [@EvelDick's 2011 HIV-positive diagnosis](#). (ICYMI: youtube.com/watch?v=_wxXctX...).

The following week, on Oct 8, Dick tells the rest of the cast about his diagnosis. (ICYMI: youtube.com/watch?v=SXgUb-A...).

I'm the first person in line for always being public with your diagnosis, I've been doing it for the last 23 years that I've known of my 31-year life with HIV. I am incredibly proud of anyone who does this for millions of people. These two episodes are worth watching in their entirety.



Nina Martinez

@marganina

.@EvelDick *|\O/* way to go! #CouplesTherapy #HIV #disclosure
@CouplesTherapy5 #notyourlastrelationship #wearefamily



4 DAYS AGO



EvelDick

@EvelDick

@marganina @CouplesTherapy5 ;)



4 DAYS AGO



EvelDick

@EvelDick

I am getting so many tweets, it won't let me see them all. But thanks go out to each and every one of you for all the love and support



4 DAYS AGO

But I had one concern about the way [@DrJennBerman](#) broached the subject with Evel Dick (at 33:13 into the Oct 1 episode):

Dr. Jenn: Do you know where you got it from or how you got it?

E.D.: I have, uh, a pretty good idea. Of course you can't be like a hundred percent. Um, in Vegas, just [expletive] out of my tree one night, and I ended up bringing this stripper back to the hotel. And so this is where, I'm just making the assumption, I could be wrong but...

[At this point, Dr. Jenn turns the conversation toward his current relationship.]

Now Dr. Jenn's question above is an all too common question, and I'm not surprised to hear it in general, but I am surprised that a psychologist would ask this. Especially when the answer would be broadcast in front of millions and one that was speculative (some of us are actually 100% sure of how we contracted HIV). Because he was asked this 'how' question, and instead of saying out front "I don't know," or outright "I had unprotected sex" (he doesn't say this exactly) and leaving it at that, his narrative pointed uncertain blame on "a stripper."

The initial concern is laid out in this first tweet:



Nina Martinez
@marganina

.@EvelDick my only concern/Q - @DrJennBerman asking if you "knew where you got it from" Think testing is the take-home here.
#CouplesTherapy



4 DAYS AGO



Nina Martinez
@marganina

.@EvelDick @DrJennBerman Placing the emphasis on the 'other' at that moment was hard to watch. But this episode will help so many, no doubt!



4 DAYS AGO



EvelDick
@EvelDick

. @marganina @DrJennBerman I do hope so... And I thank Dr Jenn for letting me tell my story on her show



4 DAYS AGO

Now I've often been told my ways of HIV thinking are in the minority...so I didn't expect a conversation to occur, until Gwenn shared her feelings too a few days later:



Gwenn Barringer
@gwenbarringer

@marganina @EvelDick @DrJennBerman yes, the how question was very disturbing for me as well.



2 DAYS AGO

I was surprised and grateful that Dick decided to engage with us even though the issue raised was more about Dr. Jenn than him:



EvelDick
@EvelDick

@gwenbarringer @marganina @DrJennBerman well, I had no problem with it, so... It also answers questions for people watching.



2 DAYS AGO



EvelDick
@EvelDick

@gwenbarringer @marganina @DrJennBerman you don't have to be gay or shoot up drugs to be infected. I am glad she asked for that reason



2 DAYS AGO



Nina Martinez
@marganina

@EvelDick @gwenbarringer @DrJennBerman yes, we agree. I got it through blood transfusion in 1983 & Gwenn's husband through blood too. (1/2)



2 DAYS AGO



Nina Martinez
@marganina

.@EvelDick @gwenbarringer @DrJennBerman what matters most is that you know you are HIV-positive. If you are human, that's your risk factor.



2 DAYS AGO

And Gwenn replies to the "you don't have to be..." statement as well:

<https://storify.com/marganina/how-you-talk-about-hiv-matters>



Gwenn Barringer
@gwenbarringer

@EvelDick @marganina I'm aware u don't have 2 be gay/shoot 2 be infected. My husband is HIV+ for 30 yrs Doesn't matter how you were infected

2 DAYS AGO

I try to clarify my initial concern below - believing that the way he was questioned influenced the information he put out there:



Nina Martinez
@marganina

@gwenbarringer @EvelDick Q brought an A where you said "weren't sure." Pls don't get me wrong. Ecstatic a hetero male voice is out there.

2 DAYS AGO

I also give Shawn a shoutout for being an outspoken HIV+ hetero male:



Nina Martinez
@marganina

@gwenbarringer meant to say *another. Your amazing husband, @shawndecker, notwithstanding, of course.

2 DAYS AGO



Shawn of the Read
@shawndecker

@marganina @gwenbarringer why thank you!

2 DAYS AGO

At this point, a secondary conversation with Dick starts out of an earlier tweet of mine (re-posted below) He has two separate responses for me:



Nina Martinez
@marganina

@[EvelDick](#) @[gwennbarringer](#) @[DrJennBerman](#) what matters most is that you know you are HIV-positive. If you are human, that's your risk factor.

2 DAYS AGO



EvelDick
@EvelDick

@[marganina](#) @[gwennbarringer](#) @[DrJennBerman](#) true, but not blowing off the fact that it was my fault in having unprotected sex in the 1st place

2 DAYS AGO



EvelDick
@EvelDick

@[marganina](#) @[gwennbarringer](#) @[DrJennBerman](#) unlike you, who had no choice in the matter, which sucks, sorry

2 DAYS AGO



Nina Martinez
@marganina

@[EvelDick](#) ... someone wanted to have sex, someone wanted to use drugs, someone needed blood... no one chooses this. It doesn't / won't suck.

2 DAYS AGO

I meant that no one rationally chooses HIV....nope not even the bug chasers, but I digress...



Nina Martinez
@marganina

@[EvelDick](#) Glad you found out. Regardless of how I got it, I/you get to show possibility of lifetime with HIV. The good gets people tested.

2 DAYS AGO

Evel responds to my "Q brought an A" tweet above with the following... which I so desperately wish was on-air!! (if there had to be an answer to an ill-thought out question...)



EvelDick
@EvelDick

@marganina @gwenbarringer well, can't be 100% sure. I was single and had some fun



2 DAYS AGO



Nina Martinez
@marganina

@EvelDick right, and I think what ppl might take away bc of the "from" question rather than a "I" statement is that a stripper is to blame.



2 DAYS AGO

Some hours later I try to share with Evel and Dr. Jenn that [@Stigma_Project](#) infographic that highlights questions to avoid when asking about HIV, such as:

How did you get it?

Who gave it to you?

(because: stigma)



Nina Martinez
@marganina

@EvelDick @gwenbarringer @DrJennBerman infographic from [@Stigma_Project](#) helps people talk/ask abt HIV wo stigma [twitter.com/Stigma_Project...](#)



2 DAYS AGO

Also unexpectedly, Shawn offered his concurrence on my main point.



Shawn of the Read
@shawndecker

@marganina @EvelDick @DrJennBerman didn't like the "how'd you get it" Q either. Not appropriate IMO as a first reaction. Client > TV viewer



2 DAYS AGO



Shawn of the Read

@shawndecker

@marganina @EvelDick @DrJennBerman when the cameras are off, in future, know that **#HIV** infection is traumatic. Revealing status shouldn't be

2 DAYS AGO

Shawn reiterates how awesome Dick's disclosure is (I don't disagree!)



Shawn of the Read

@shawndecker

@**EvelDick** and more power to you for coming forward. I wish all the best to you- I was very moved by your words and courage. **#rockon**

2 DAYS AGO

And finally, the person who I wanted most to respond (Dr. Jenn), replied to Shawn's dislike of the 'how' question!



Dr. Jenn Berman

@DrJennBerman

@**shawndecker** @**EvelDick** Important therapeutic issue, how he contracted it. Gives me info about his emotional state and possible self blaming.

2 DAYS AGO

She raises the issue of self-blaming as a reason for asking the 'how' question. So I reply:



Nina Martinez

@marganina

@**DrJennBerman** @**shawndecker** If internal stigma was intent of Q, then there's a more direct way to ask esp on-cam, e.g. Do you blame yourself?

2 DAYS AGO



Nina Martinez

@marganina

@DrJennBerman @shawndecker what happened instead was a deflection onto the "other" (woman), which adds to stigma when communicating abt HIV.

2 DAYS AGO

I don't think she realized I meant that strippers were being stigmatized, turning her attention to Dick:



Dr. Jenn Berman

@DrJennBerman

@marganina @shawndecker I don't think that @EvelDick felt judged. It was an important part of his story for me to understand his psyche.

2 DAYS AGO



Nina Martinez

@marganina

@DrJennBerman @shawndecker @EvelDick not at all (& glad for you, Dick), but strippers out there perhaps (as all the coverage highlights it).

2 DAYS AGO



EvelDick

@EvelDick

@DrJennBerman @marganina @shawndecker never felt judged at all, quite the opposite actually. It wasn't a problem for me & would have said so

2 DAYS AGO

At this point, I realize they either don't get what I'm getting at because they're both new to talking about HIV or...? But luckily Shawn brings this to an agreeable close.



Nina Martinez

@marganina

.@EvelDick @DrJennBerman thx for disc, understand your pts, just don't think you understood me (thread: twitter.com/DrJennBerman/s...)

2 DAYS AGO



Shawn of the Read

@shawndecker

@EvelDick @DrJennBerman @marganina I hear you all. It's just been a loaded question for decades. Thanks for sharing your thoughts & be well!

2 DAYS AGO



EvelDick

@EvelDick

@shawndecker @DrJennBerman @marganina thank you

2 DAYS AGO

Dr. Jenn offers her acknowledgement the following morning:



Dr. Jenn Berman

@DrJennBerman

@marganina @EvelDick I understand. I just see it differently but I do appreciate your perspective.

A DAY AGO

Yet, the overarching theme is missed here. Just because Dick doesn't have a problem with the line of questioning, nor does Dr. Jenn, does not mean that there was no HIV stigmatization that occurred here. Having a therapeutic reason to ask about someone's circumstances behind their HIV acquisition is one thing, on-camera another, but saying what it is (to elucidate self-blame), and then not going about it directly, instead catering to one of the most obvious TV viewer questions out there, is a missed opportunity for responsible dialogue. Words have power - use it for good!

I hope in future discussions they will leave the stripper out of it. I also hope that whoever she is, she's HIV-negative.

The Oct 8 episode is a great testament to the kinds of social support that make getting an HIV diagnosis and the subsequent HIV disclosures easier for all of us: those already diagnosed, and more importantly, the soon-to-be. I applaud his courage and wish him well as a public face of HIV.