One of the enduring slogans from the HIV response is: Viruses don’t discriminate. People do.

Stigma has huge power to undermine efforts to prevent and treat health conditions. It emerges quickly in times of crisis. To stave off the fear of disease, we cling to an identity of people ‘like me’ (who are not at risk, or affected) vs ‘others’ (who are). The ‘others’ are usually those already marginalised by existing social norms: stigma is gendered, homophobic, racist, ageist, ability-ist and elitist.

But it is not inevitable. The HIV response tells us that, in addition to the hand-washing, the mask wearing, the staying at home and social-distancing, an important contribution we can make to the safety of ourselves and our communities in the time of COVID-19, is to stand against stigma.

WAYS TO STAND AGAINST COVID-19 STIGMA with LESSONS FROM HIV RESPONSE

1. MIND YOUR LANGUAGE - Language is a powerful tool to create stigma – and also to stand against it. We talk about people living with HIV (not ‘infected by HIV’, or ‘AIDS victims’); we talk about behaviours (people who use drugs) rather than potentially disparaging identities (‘addicts’).

In the COVID-19 response, we can modify our language to avoid unintentionally ‘othering’ those affected by the virus – instead of ‘victims’, say ‘people affected by COVID-19’. Instead of ‘infected’, say ‘affected’.

Small adjustments in the language we use can have a big impact on reducing stigma and increase awareness of inadvertent use of stigmatising language.

2. TALK ABOUT SAFETY, NOT WAR - The language of combat is often used when talking about illness, from cancer to COVID-19, whether in reference to an individual ‘battle’ or a global ‘war’ against a disease.

This language risks associating people affected by the disease with the threat that must be fought off, increasing stigma and discrimination.

A good alternative is to talk about creating safety from, rather than fighting the pandemic. This can open up creative and innovative thinking and spaces for new opportunities beyond ending the epidemic – such as community-driven online safety campaigns and collaborative support systems.

3. DON’T BLAME YOURSELF OR OTHERS - Overwhelmed with public health advice about hand washing and social distancing, we may be quick to assume that if we catch the virus, it’s our own fault. Or even worse, we might blame someone else for ‘giving’ it to us.

But for many of us it’s not possible, or feasible, to live in such a way that we’re entirely without risk of COVID-19. While doing what we can to protect ourselves and others, we must also acknowledge that our choices are often the result of a
complicated process of weighing health concerns against financial, practical, emotional and social interests and relationships.

Blaming ourselves, or others, for falling ill, or for ‘putting others at risk’ by being ill, is simplistic and unhelpful.

4. TALK ABOUT IT - Silence breeds stigma. Talking openly about something will help normalise it, so it doesn’t become an uncomfortable topic we don’t talk about for fear of saying the wrong thing. Talk about your experiences, your fears, and your questions. Listen to others’ with patience, interest, kindness and respect.

5. BUT DON’T GOSSIP - Don’t speculate about people’s health status, and don’t share someone’s personal health information with others.

In many places across the world, lack of confidentiality among medical professionals as well as neighbours, friends and acquaintances remains a powerful disincentive to get tested for HIV and to seek treatment and care. Respect each other’s privacy.

If someone wants their friends/ neighbours/ work colleagues to know they or people in their household have or had COVID-19, let them share it themselves.

6. COUNTER MISINFORMATION - Rumour and misinformation feeds stigma, and undermines any rights-based public health response. Seek out and check information against evidence based, authorised sources, such as the World Health Organization (WHO) or national health authorities.

Don’t be afraid to correct people if what they say is incorrect.

7. PROTECT JOBS AND LIVELIHOODS

Within a short time, COVID-19 has caused a huge economic crisis and dramatically impacted the world of work. Millions have lost their jobs and livelihoods due to lockdowns and closure of economic activities.

As recovery plans are made, it will be important to ensure that those who were affected by COVID-19 face no stigma in resuming their jobs or economic activities.

8. Share positive stories and give COVID-19 a human face: Behind all the numbers are human beings.

People living with HIV made a huge difference in the HIV response by sharing their stories willingly, undertaking advocacy and activism for a rights-based response. This approach needs to be applied in COVID-19 as well.

It was uplifting to see the photos of hospital staff clapping as fully recovered COVID-19 patients were discharged from hospitals.

Such positive stories will go a long way in developing a COVID-19 response free from stigma and discrimination.
