***“I feel happy that I am now a peer educator and I educate people using my own experience.”***

  MSF226335, MSF226334

Nineteen-year-old \*Rutendo was just eight years old when she started antiretroviral (ARV) treatment for HIV. She did not understand why she needed the medication, which gave her headaches and a rash.

Rutendo had been infected with the HIV by her mother at birth. Two years later, her mother died, and she was brought up by her grandparents in Mbare.

In her teens, Rutendo started to have relationships with boys, and this brought up a lot of difficult questions to which she did not have the answers.

“I wondered how I would tell my boyfriend that I was HIV-positive and was on ARV treatment,” says Rutendo. “I didn’t know how I would explain about how I got infected. These thoughts troubled me a lot.”

The situation was brought to a head by a family member’s unguarded words. “A new daughter-in-law in the family got to know that I was on ARVs, and she told people in the neighborhood about her discovery,” says Rutendo. “I was uncomfortable and hurt because people started talking about it and some asked me if this was true.”

Rutendo felt exposed and ashamed, and decided to stop taking her treatment. “I felt very humiliated and I stopped taking my medication,” she says. “My behaviour turned wild. I started drinking beer and taking drugs. I had friends who encouraged me to do all those bad things.”

Without treatment, Rutendo became unwell. “Because I was no longer taking my medication, I fell sick. “My grandmother brought me to the Edith Opperman clinic in Mbare where I met a counsellor from MSF who encouraged me to adhere to my treatment. The counsellor also discouraged me from taking drugs and I stopped.”

For two months, Rutendo attended adherence counselling sessions. Because of her successful adherence to her treatment, her viral load – which had been very high – dropped until it was undetectable.

After some time, Rutendo was approached by an MSF health promoter, who had a proposal for her.

“The health promoter told me that I was a survivor, and encouraged me to be a ‘peer educator’ so that I could encourage other adolescents to adhere to treatment,” says Rutendo. “I started spending a lot of time at the clinic, talking to other adolescents. I shared my experiences with them and I told them how I felt and how painful it is, because I had walked the journey and gone through it all.”

“I feel happy that I am now a peer educator and I educate people using my own experience,” she says.

She also encourages other teenagers to protect themselves from unplanned pregnancies, as well as from HIV and other sexually transmitted infections, by having safe sex and using the reproductive health services that MSF provides.

“What I have observed in the community is that adolescents are engaging in unprotected sex,” says Rutendo. “When they fall pregnant, some consider committing suicide. So I also encourage adolescents to access sexual and reproductive health services to prevent sexually transmitted infections and pregnancy.”

Her work as a peer counsellor also involves talking to and educating the parents of teenagers. “Parents should have information so that they can assist their children with information,” says Rutendo. “We encourage parents to allow their children to access sexual and reproductive health services at the clinic.”

Some parents are initially opposed to this idea, but Rutendo is persuasive. “Sometimes they complain that we are encouraging their children to indulge in sex,” she says, “but we always try to explain to them that we know that adolescents are having sex, and we want them to be informed so that they can make informed decisions.”

Rutendo’s work with MSF has taught her a lot, she says. As well as helping other adolescents, she has also found solutions to some of her own questions and anxieties about the future.

*MSF, alongside the City of Harare Health Department, has run an adolescent-friendly corner at the Edith Opperman clinic in Mbare, Harare, since November 2015. MSF provides adolescent- friendly services that include general health check-ups, HIV testing and counselling, screening for sexually transmitted infections (STIs), and family planning, all free of charge.*

\*Not real name