

Health

Coming Out in the Age of AIDS

Coming out has never been a simple or painless thing. Most of us as lesbian, gay, and bisexual people, in fact, spend a great deal of our lives engaged in the continual process as we struggle to determine the role our sexual orientations play in our lives and the ways in which we and others define ourselves.

Especially for gay and bisexual men, the AIDS epidemic has had a dramatic impact on coming out. The forces at work have been both external and internal. Externally, we have had to watch while the media and public opinion defined AIDS as a gay disease, and we have had to deal with straight communities, families, and friends who responded with varying degrees of concern, understanding, or paranoia. Internally, we have had to cope with a complex mix of fear, anger, grief, guilt, powerlessness, empowerment, and frustration as the epidemic touched our community, our friends, and sometimes ourselves.

Gay male life has been irrevocably changed by AIDS. How then do we adapt our lives, and especially our coming out, to those changes? The answer to that question depends largely on where we are in the coming out process.

For some, the very identification of AIDS with gayness may delay coming out at all - the fear instilled by the media and society sends the erroneous message that if you are gay, you'll inevitably get AIDS. Not surprisingly, that frightening message has kept some people in the closet far longer than they might have been otherwise. (And it doesn't simply affect gay men; lesbians, too, feel painted with the label "at risk" and struggle with the implications of that, simply because the press fails to distinguish between gay men and women and keeps lesbians invisible.)

For others, the AIDS epidemic has had an unexpectedly positive side. While in previous generations many reported that they grew up feeling that they were "the only one," it has become virtually impossible to live in North America today and not be aware of homosexuality. Gay people (and gay sexuality) are more visible than ever before.

Let's face it - before 1981, how many times did you see or hear the words "anal intercourse" in the newspaper, on television, or in the classroom? Gay men and lesbians show up more as spokespeople on the evening news, and even in the schools. Some degree of isolation is being broken

down through these images, even if the picture being painted is yet incomplete and slanted.

In addition to affecting how we go through the first step of coming to define ourselves as gay, AIDS also has had a huge impact on that essential next step - how we find and connect with other gay people.

It used to be that many gay men, in that first wonderful flush of sexual awareness and discovery, went through a period of extensive sexual experimentation and activity. That inclination is still there for many, but the risks, obviously, have been increased by the epidemic.

The need to understand fully what safer sex is and to have the skills to negotiate it with all partners from day one of sexual activity is obviously a huge demand to place on someone just beginning to be sexually active. AIDS education in the schools and media is, because of our cultural taboos about sexuality (and particularly about homosexuality), woefully inadequate to meet the needs of gay men just coming out. Yet it is equally unlikely that someone in that position will feel comfortable turning to gay-identified organizations or media for the needed information.

So where does that leave a gay man (young or old) coming out - uncertain about the exact implications of safer sex, counting on his sexual partner(s) to be responsible for limit-setting, and naturally curious about the full range of sexual activity? It can be a confusing and frightening time. Some might hold back on sexual activity, afraid of the consequences, while others may forge ahead without the knowledge or skills to practice safer sex.

Clearly, our community, and all of us as individuals, must be prepared to accept some responsibility for teaching the newly out gay man some of the necessary survival skills for the age of AIDS. Whether that teaching is direct when involved with a sexual partner or simply verbal, helpful pointers or direction to more resources like the AIDS hotline, OUTRIGHT, or Vermont C.A.R.E.S., it is a vital and logical extension of a time-honored tradition of communal support for those coming out.

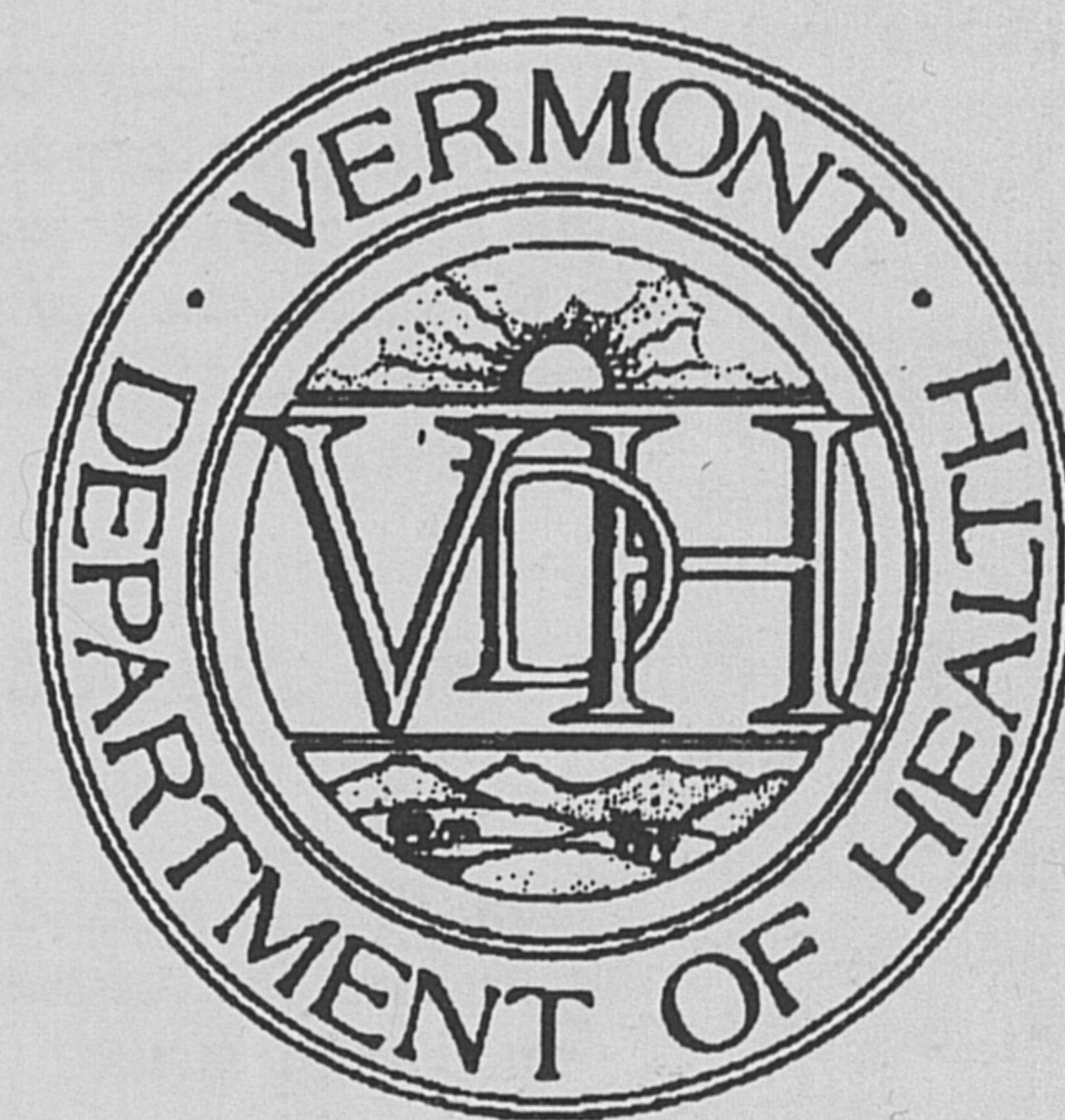
For some, AIDS has meant stepping back from the gay community. For fear of their own health, fear of the pain of growing close to people who may eventually get sick, or fear of discrimination simply from being associated with the community, some gay men retreat further into the closet

or into an emotional and social isolation.

But for others, AIDS has strengthened the ties to the community. AIDS organizations and political groups are full of volunteers who were never out before, never previously connected to the community other than in a social sense. For them, AIDS has brought the coming out process another step further, as they take care of people who are sick or agitate for more action around AIDS. The ranks of groups like ACT-UP are full of men and women who were never politicized before the epidemic, but who have realized that money or living in a gay ghetto is really no insulation when their friends get sick or society and government respond inadequately. A sense of community has risen among all those who do AIDS-related work, even if it is behind the scenes and not on the evening news.

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For confidential AIDS Information



Call
1-800-882-AIDS