

Health

Bridging the HIV +/- Gap

Of all the things that separate gay men from each other, few have had as much impact as the one most recently introduced: HIV status.

The men's community has been divided into two worlds, each with its own reality: seropositive and seronegative, with those who don't know their HIV status floating in between. Without realizing it, we often define ourselves and others in those terms. In the process, we create a gulf which gets expressed in countless ways, from the crude rejection of HIV+ men to more subtle variations on how we interact.

Of all the areas where the gap exists, none is more prominent than sexual practices. Even some of the most educated and safe-sex-conscious HIV- or HIV-unknown gay men will become irrational when it comes to the question of sexual activity by/with HIV+ men.

Some believe that no one who is HIV+ should be sexually active at all, while others are adamant that, even when practicing safer sex, an HIV+ person has the obligation to disclose their status to every one-night stand or trick. Others say that they would never have sex with a person they knew or suspected to be HIV-positive.

While many seronegative men put the onus for disclosure on those who are seropositive, men living with HIV are frequently critical of the way some HIV-negative men handle safer sex. According to one friend with HIV, "I start out intending only to do things that I consider safe, but they push the limits, and want to do things that make me afraid I'll infect them. I'm left with deciding between telling them my status, or letting it happen."

In all the discussion critical of seropositive men who have unsafe sex, rarely is the other consenting partner considered to bear equal responsibility for his own health. If the point of practicing safer sex is that you have to assume that your partner may be HIV-positive, why should the ground rules change when you find out that one actually is?

Yet things sometime go to the other extreme - some seropositive men are so conscious of the risk of transmission that they insist on more precautions than probably necessary to "protect" their partners. Some have even decided only to have sex with other men with HIV, or to become celibate. One man I know insists that his HIV-negative partners wear latex gloves

when they give him a hand-job - a counter-erotic idea if ever there was one.

The issues are not limited to having sex with each other. Even the simplest parts of friendship can be challenged by the HIV split.

Most men who learn they are seronegative disclose their results casually, with an understandable amount of relief and happiness. Yet that disclosure may put an HIV+ person in the same social circle in an even more difficult position as he struggles with his own more difficult issues of when and whom he will tell of his own status.

Deciding to tell someone that you are HIV+ involves a great deal - putting trust in that person, taking on some degree of responsibility for helping them deal with the results, and hoping they will be supportive of you in appropriate ways.

One complaint voiced by many seropositive people is that once their status is known, seronegative friends start to view them vastly differently. "Even though I'm quite healthy, I get the feeling most of my friends are already starting to say goodbye, and they are shutting down their emotional involvement with me because they think it will be easier for them when I finally get sick" says one HIV+ man who has told many of his friends. Another expressed that "I'm handled with kid gloves all the time, like my friends are afraid to get angry at me or hurt my feelings."

Another seronegative friend put it just as clearly: "At this point, if I were starting a friendship with someone and I found out he were HIV+, I would probably back off. I've already buried too many friends, and I'm not up to going through all that again if I can avoid it."

Talking about other people's HIV status is another area where the gap becomes evident. Rumors about test results travel quickly; confidences aren't always kept; and speculation is common place. It seems to me that most gay men I know, both HIV+ and HIV-, keep a mental list of who they know who is positive, who is negative, and who is questionable.

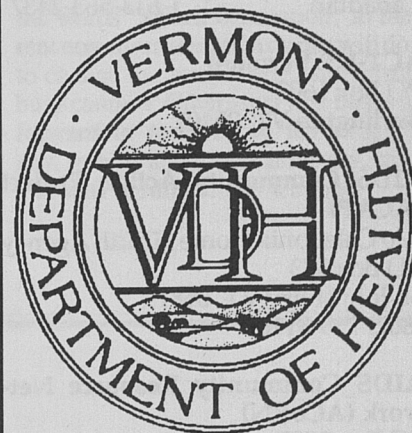
This gossip can quickly fall to the level of total trash: on more than one occasion I've heard the word "slut" used in conjunction with such speculation, coupled with such moral pronouncements as "I wouldn't be surprised if..." and "Do you know how many people he slept with in the last few years..."

Sometimes the gossip really goes beyond acceptable limits: information told in confidence to a friend should not be shared with the whole bar the next night; disclosure of the identity of people who may have been seen during a visit to a doctor's office is inappropriate; and rumors started simply because someone was seen leaving an AIDS service organization's office simply throw up more walls of distrust.

The supportive networks that people with HIV have built can also, at times, be seen as exclusionary. One AIDS activist from another state once told me that he was "tired of people with HIV who acted as though they belong to some special club that I can't join. It's like they want a Medal of Valor for what they're going through, as though none of the rest of us are going

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