

Health

Maintaining a Safer Sex Life

Part One: Dealing with the Loss of Sexual Options

Ed. Note: The following article deals with sexual information in a frank and honest manner. Rather than censor what is potentially life-saving information, we leave it to our readers to exercise their discretion in reading this material.

By this point, most of us know about AIDS and safer sex: how to use a condom; what's safe and what isn't; how the antibody test works; how HIV gets spread.

Knowing the facts, however, isn't always enough. The challenge of making changes in our own sexual practices, and then maintaining those changes over a long period of time, is incredibly difficult.

Ask anyone who has ever quit smoking or gone on a diet how difficult it is to stick with it. Why would we imagine that making changes in something as profoundly personal as our sexual activity would be any easier?

There is one huge difference: while smoking one more cigarette won't give you lung cancer and having one more piece of buttercream cake probably won't produce a heart attack, one incident of unprotected sex could leave you infected with HIV.

That may point out the most difficult thing about maintaining a safer sex life: it isn't a temporary thing, a fad to drop when it gets boring or inconvenient. It's a permanent, on-going necessity. Even though we could all probably use one, we don't get a vacation from it.

So how do we deal with those changes without "slipping up?" And how do we deal with it when we do slip?

First, we need to remember that this whole thing sucks! It just plain isn't fair to be expected to deal with it all, to always have to be on guard, to worry about which one of our friends will be next, to have to think about AIDS any time we have sex.

AIDS imposes artificial limits on our sexuality, and let's face it, society already tries to put too many limits on us. It's sad and infuriating and annoying and one of the worst parts of the epidemic.

If we're going to be able to deal with the limits, we have to be honest about the way we feel about them. We need to recognize that we have lost many things to this epidemic, and not the least of those losses

are the sexual possibilities. If we miss fucking without a condom, if we long for the old days when a carefree attitude toward casual sex was the norm, if we find real intimacy threatened by latex, if we wish we could again enjoy free-ranging sexual experimentation...we just can't pretend those feelings aren't there. If we don't deal with them, we increase the chances that we may act on them.

The first step in resolving them is acknowledging them; it's okay, in fact it's healthy, to be angry about it, to need to grieve for all that's been taken away. Whether that means making sure we can talk about those feelings with our friends, or taking up a physical activity that gives outlet to the anger, or seeing a counselor, or allowing ourselves to feel just a little sad about it sometimes - we've got to let it out.

Try the following little exercise, either by yourself or, even better, with a small group of trusted gay male friends. Set aside an hour, and on a sheet make a list of "Things I Miss (or Never Did But Wish I Could Try) That I Can't Do Any More Because of HIV."

Then really use your imagination and go to it. Make the most comprehensive list you can of everything you miss, no matter how outrageous, sleazy, romantic, or esoteric it may be (see why it's more fun to do with friends?).

Pretty soon you'll have a great list that can range from "being gang-banged in the orgy room of the St. Mark's Baths" to "feeling my lover cum inside me," with a whole lot of stuff in between.

Now go over the list and think about what you miss most about things (how hot it got you, how it made you feel), what it meant to you when it was happening, or would mean if it could happen. Take each item one by one. Ask yourself, "Is it really something I have to give up, or is it safe? Is there something safe that I can replace it with?"

You might be surprised about how much you can still do safely, perhaps with some adjustments. If your list included something like "hot sweaty bodies going at it," you don't have to give that up at all, because the hot sweaty body part is safe. Likewise, if you miss having lots of different partners, having sex in off-beat places, or dozens of other different things, they can still be done quite safely.

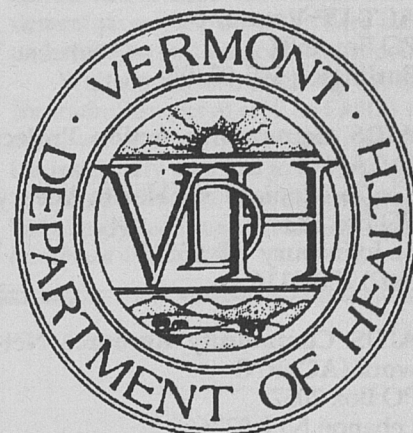
Other things might involve more ad-

justments, but a little creativity can go a long way. What if your list includes "missing the taste of cum" (assuming you are of the school that considers oral sex risky)? At the very least, you can always enjoy the taste of your own safely. And perhaps there are replacements that would be more satisfying - if you can't have somebody ejaculate in your mouth, maybe you'll learn to appreciate the visual experience of watching him cum onto parts of your body. Think about what kinds of trade-offs you can make that might be satisfying replacements.

Besides activities that might be risky, we've also had to give up activities just because our community has changed in response to the epidemic. While multiple partners; anonymous sex; and the bar, bath, and outdoor cruising scene may have been the routine that people followed in the 1970's - the liberating breaking of taboos and social inhibitions - they have faded in prominence as we've made dramatic changes.

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Information



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