
RESURGENCE OF HIV AMONG MEN WHO HAVE SEX WITH MEN

The “syndemics” of sexual and physical abuse, depression, and substance abuse

By Timothy Flanigan, MD

Dramatic headway has been made in combating the HIV and AIDS epidemic. The treatment for HIV has improved so dramatically with combination medications that HIV+ patients can remain healthy until a ripe old age. These medications which can be taken as one pill once a day can fully suppress HIV viral replication. In the US, there have been profound reductions in new HIV infections among injection drug users, as drug users have recognized the dangers of sharing needles. In many parts of the world, heterosexual HIV spread has fallen with the “ABC” message (Abstinence, Be faithful, Condom use).

Unhappily, HIV infections in the US have not fallen among gay, bisexual, and transgender men. HIV transmission continues unabated because of sex with multiple partners. Anonymous sex which usually involves meeting men on the internet, at sex parties, or at bath houses have fueled the fire with continuing spread of the HIV epidemic. Along with the resurgence in HIV, has been a dramatic increase in syphilis among men who have sex with men. In many communities syphilis rates have more than doubled in the last two to three years (to learn more about the increases in HIV and syphilis among men who have sex with men go to CDC.gov).

A high percentage of these new infections have been among youth who, when introduced to the gay lifestyle, have multiple partners. Unfortunately, in many high risk venues such as bath houses, adult book stores, or internet facilitated sex, condom use is not common. HIV disclosure in these settings is even less common than condom use.

Why are so many youth, and sometimes older men, placing themselves at such high risk? A recent term “syndemics” has been coined which describes overlapping epidemics that may be interrelated, synergistic and can fuel each other. Studies that have delved into the lives of many men that have high risk sex with men have described the syndemics (ie. overlapping epidemics) that are affecting these men. These syndemics include childhood or adult physical or sexual abuse with subsequent post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and severe damage to self esteem. Depression and anxiety disorders are very common among risky gay, bisexual, and transgender men which can be made worse by serial emotional, sexual, or physical trauma that some men experience when engaged in risky lifestyles. Substance abuse with alcohol, cocaine, or amphetamine use (crystal meth for example) is much more common than in the general population and fuels the fire of risky behaviors and HIV and syphilis transmission. Understanding the high rates of these syndemics, helps to understand why so many men who have sex with men are becoming newly HIV infected.

It is not an issue of knowledge. There have been recent outbreaks of HIV among US university students that are gay, bisexual, or transgender who are both very smart and very well educated. It’s only by understanding that many very risky men are grappling with prior trauma, severe depression or anxiety disorders, or active substance use, can we respond with effective support and prevention. Focusing on condom distribution and condom promotion is not effective HIV prevention, precisely because it does not start with helping a person who is suffering from these syndemics.

The good news is that many men are resilient and want help to heal from prior trauma, mental illness, and/or substance abuse. Even men suffering from all of these syndemics can heal and overcome the pain and suffering they have endured so long.

How does one start? By suggesting to someone that they seek help. One of the biggest barriers to seeking help is recognizing the illness. Denial of substance abuse, depression, anxiety disorders, and the pain endured from prior

trauma is so common. AA (Alcoholics Anonymous) and other 12 Step programs can be enormously helpful. There is treatment and it does work.

We do have good tools now for HIV prevention. Condoms are effective at decreasing transmission of HIV and syphilis; serial HIV testing is important; PREP (PReExposure Prophylaxis) can reduce HIV transmission by 40%, and treatment with HAART (Highly Active AntiRetroviral Therapy, ie HIV treatment) can decrease HIV heterosexual spread from a HIV infected person by over 90%. A person centered approach, though, is needed. Preventing HIV among men who have sex with men has to start with recognizing the trauma and pain which so many men suffer from prior or ongoing abuse, mental illness or substance abuse. By recognizing that trauma and pain, help can be sought and healing can begin.

An important part of the healing is spiritual support and solace. Shame and self-condemnation is part and parcel of depression, PTSD, and substance abuse. Recognizing the unfathomable love of God for each of us and the unconditional and overwhelming forgiveness for ALL of our sins through the suffering and gift of self of Christ on the cross can be a balm on our wounds and support on the path to recovery. Unhappily, hostility and alienation by many in the gay community to organized religion in general, and to Christianity and Catholicism in particular, can make it very difficult to turn to the Church.

The good news is that we are created resilient and it is natural to seek healing from terrible pain and suffering. There is treatment for PTSD, severe depression and anxiety disorders, and substance abuse. We are all forgiven through the grace of God and the suffering gift of His Son and none of us is beyond help. Recognizing the terrible toll of these syndemics can help us understand why many men continue to become HIV infected. Person-centered prevention which assists in the healing from these syndemics will go a long way to ending the HIV epidemic.

Dr. Flanigan is Professor of Medicine at the Alpert Medical School at Brown University. He is Chief of Infectious Diseases and an expert in HIV/AIDS medicine. He is studying in the permanent diaconate program for the Diocese of Providence.