

Bug Chasers: HIV Russian Roulette

Bareback Parties Offer the Gift that Keeps on Killing

By Michael James

A small portion of gay men known as bug chasers, which encompasses the practice of barebacking, is generating alarm within medical and mental health circles across the country and locally. However, those engaging in such sexual activities feel it is becoming a common practice.

Barebacking, by definition, is engaging in anal sexual activity without a condom. Bugchasing is practiced by those who actually want to become infected with the HIV virus.

Denver Office worker 'Chad', spoke to *The Express* about his experiences in the world of barebacking. HIV-positive for ten years, he has been having bareback sex exclusively for the past year.

"Death doesn't frighten me at all," he says. "Life is more frightening than death."

When asked why he started having unprotected sex, he said, "I always wanted to do it but was afraid to. It was the forbidden fruit— forbidden pleasure—of gay sex. Gay men are now crossing that line."

Local clinical therapist Wayne Brown says he has had several clients over the past three years who have discussed barebacking, bugchasing and other aspects of such activity. "We live in a body worshipping culture," Brown says. "Some people may have low self-esteem issues with the way they look and that feeds into why they are willing to take these types of risks."

The gay community in general has acknowledged the threat of HIV infection for decades. It is due to this that condom use has, for the most part, been an accepted practice among gay men engaging in anal intercourse.

However, Brown says that some clients feel that they can do away with condoms once they have tested positive. Others say that since they are positive, they can legally acquire steroids from their doctors to enhance their bodies to fit into the body-worshipping mold.

Brown says he attempts to educate those who believe that condoms are no longer needed about re-infection, which is when an HIV positive person becomes infected with a new, different or drug-resistant strain of HIV. It is believed that re-infection can complicate or limit treatment options.

However, Brown concedes that there is limited research on the theory of re-infection and no definitive evidence is currently available.

Over the past 10 years, Chad says he has only been on two drug combinations and says his doctors have now directed him to completely stop all of his medications. "In my experience, more people have died from medication than from HIV," he says. "People

don't care because they have a lot more treatment options today. There are so many combinations that people know that they will be okay."

Brown and other health professionals feel that people's belief that HIV has become a treatable disease is leading more HIV positive gay men into bareback sex.

He says that such behavior could be partly accredited to what he calls safe sex fatigue. "For decades we have been exposed to everything we shouldn't be doing. People are getting tired of hearing the same message."

There are other men who engage in bareback conversion parties, whereas several men will engage in unprotected sex without ever knowing which of them is actually HIV positive. Within such circles are the bugchasers.

Brown says he has spoken to bug chasers who participate in conversion parties. During the parties, it is understood that no one mentions AIDS or HIV, although everyone is aware that some participants are negative and others are positive.

The men then engage in as many sexual activities with each other as possible, thus increasing their chances of contracting 'the bug' (HIV).

At conversion parties, those who are HIV positive are referred to as gift-givers and those wanting to contract the virus are known as bug chasers or gift-takers.

Although Chad is unaware of such parties in his area, he agrees with Brown's safe-sex fatigue concept. "There is only so much you can take," he says. "After so long, you just don't care anymore."

Although Chad says barebacking has

become common practice within his circle of friends, he doesn't know of anyone that fits the definition of a bug chaser. However, he says that those he has bareback sex with are both positive and negative.

While such activities only involve a small minority of the gay population, experts stress that it should be a great concern for the gay community as a whole. Chad says that barebacking "is becoming institutionalized."

Now, barebackers have their own place in cyberspace with the website, bareback.com. The site has a live chat area, photos and profiles of barebackers across the country ranging in age from 18 to 80. A general search of people with South Florida zip codes returns hundreds of active members within a 30-mile radius.

Brown feels that such websites are glamorizing unsafe sex. "It should be noted that such individuals make up a small minority of the gay population and is part of a gay subculture," he says.

He also stated that young gay men who use such drugs a crystal methamphetamine, ecstasy and GHB will engage in such activities with little inhibition. Their enthusiastic participation is credited to the fact that such drugs can greatly impair their judgment. Also present in the party drug scene and amongst barebackers is Viagra.

"I'm now seeing an incredible rise in Viagra use as a party drug in those in their late teens and early twenties," Brown says. "It is used in combination because long term use of party



Local clinical therapist Wayne Brown

drugs can cause impotence."

Chad, however, feels that even those using party drugs are aware of what they are doing. "Anytime you use drugs and mix them with alcohol and other drugs you are totally ready [for sex]," he says.

Both agreed that mixing certain drugs with alcohol or with other drugs can be dangerous and lethal.

"But, people aren't waking up and crying over what they did the night before," Chad says. "They're aware of what they're doing, even if they seem incoherent."

"A large part of the problem is that younger people have not experienced firsthand the death that surrounded AIDS in the beginning of the epidemic," Brown says.

Experts agree that most people don't seek mental health therapy and that the relatively few individuals who are speaking to them about bug chasing and barebacking could represent a much larger portion than believed. Brown says, "This could just be the tip of the iceberg."

Like Mother, Like Daughter

Local Author to Hold Workshop With Lesbian Mother

By Logan Stone

Joyce Moskowitz, an author and spiritual teacher living in Davie, will be holding a special workshop with her mother on January 27 titled *A Lesbian Mother and Her Daughter Speak About Coming Out*.

The workshop, which will be held at Fort Lauderdale's Sunshine Cathedral from 1:00 pm to 3:00 pm, is billed as "a powerful, healing, loving and life affirming afternoon as mother and daughter share their story, hope, insight and guidance about coming out and accepting who we truly are."

Moskowitz currently facilitates a support group for children of gay and lesbian families at the Sunshine Cathedral, which is located at 1480 SW 9th Avenue, on the first Sunday of each month. She is a prominent hypnoterapist,

life transformation coach and author of *Hooked On Feeling Bad: 3 Steps To Living the Life You Love*.

Her mother, Arleen Bandler, is a lesbian and certified psychotherapist and psychoanalyst from New York City. The workshop will offer insight into their mother daughter relationship and the particular joys and sorrows often associated with being the child of a gay parent.

Moskowitz is also seeking participants to be interviewed for a book she is currently writing on celebrating the loving bond between gay and lesbian parents and their children. It will bring to light stories on these families and how children and their parents have faced and overcome challenges along the way.

Moskowitz is seeking children of gay and



lesbian parents of all ages to share their stories, experiences and feelings about their family and their lives. The information from the interviews will be kept confidential, and all names will be changed for book publication.

"The diversity of the stories, all connected by the same thread of a child loving their parent, regardless of sexual preference, is woven into the book. It is an important message for some to share and many to read," says Moskowitz.

For more information on the workshop or the book, contact Joyce Moskowitz at 954.424.7994, or visit www.joycemoskowitz.com.



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