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**UNEDITED
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Summary of Findings

**ASSESSING THE ATTITUDES AND OPINIONS OF SAN FRANCISCO
GAY/QUEER/BISEXUAL MEN**

RESULTS FROM TWELVE FOCUS GROUPS

A Report To:

THE SAN FRANCISCO AIDS FOUNDATION

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COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGIES

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INTRODUCTION

This report summarizes key findings from twelve focus groups held with San Francisco gay/queer/bisexual men. Two groups were held in December 1992, and the remaining ten groups were held in January 1993. All groups were held in downtown San Francisco, and they were segmented so that each group consisted of different types of men. A listing of how the groups were segmented can be found in Appendix C of this report.

The purpose of these groups was to see what issues are of importance to gay/queer/bisexual men in 1993, to determine the attitudes and opinions that San Francisco gay/queer/bisexual men have about AIDS, to see how the disease has changed and continues to change their lives, and to begin to determine if AIDS prevention campaigns need to be re-designed. A variety of topics were covered in each group, from general questions about why these men live in San Francisco to more specific questions about why some men still engage in unprotected anal intercourse. Specific attention was paid to how attitudes and opinions may have changed during the past five years.

In total, 133 participants attended one of the twelve groups. The smallest group consisted of seven participants, and the largest group consisted of fourteen participants. All of the groups were recruited so as to ensure that each was diversified according to a variety of criteria. A copy of the screening questionnaire can be found in Appendix B of this report.

Even though this report makes extensive use of verbatim comments, it is of course not possible to use all comments that may have been relevant. The reader is encouraged to read some or all of the over 700 pages of transcriptions and to listen to the audio tapes.

Finally, a word of thanks is in order to all of the men who shared their lives with us over the course of six evenings. Their willingness to be honest and to tell sometimes painful stories is greatly appreciated.

ORGANIZATION OF THE REPORT

This report is organized in four sections as follows:

The ***Methodology*** comments on the advantages of focus groups for this type of research and details the recruiting process.

The ***Summary and Recommendations*** summarizes key findings from the groups and gives recommendations for future action.

The ***Overview of Findings*** reviews the collected information, including verbatim comments of selected participants when applicable.

The ***Appendices*** include the discussion guide used to conduct the groups, the screener used to recruit participants, a listing of how the groups were segmented, and a listing of the group participants.

METHODOLOGY

The small size of focus groups allows for considerable interaction between participants and permits in-depth exploration of themes and ideas which are brought out in the course of the discussion. This interaction induced by the group discussion has many advantages over one-on-one interviews relied upon in survey research in that:

- Participants are stimulated by other group members to refine and expand upon their ideas and opinions. Focus group discussants are free to comment and respond to questions in a way that seems best to them. Unlike respondents in survey research, they are not required to choose from an interviewer-selected list of alternatives.
- A comment by one member may trigger a new idea in another member of the group. When this happens, the idea may spread throughout the group, changing as it passes from one member to another. This process can give the researcher an insight which would not be obtainable otherwise.
- Individuals are under no pressure to make up an answer in order to satisfy the demands of the moderator, because questions are addressed to the group.

Focus group interviews are widely used in marketing and public opinion research in order to gain insights and formulate hypotheses. They are used for a variety of purposes, including generating new product concepts, developing media themes and messages, and testing advertising materials.

Because groups are small, participants may not represent a sample of a larger population. **This report, therefore, should be regarded as directional rather than definitive in nature.** Readers of this report are cautioned not to generalize these findings to larger population groups. Subsequent quantitative research would be necessary in order to test the generalizability of these findings.

Recruiting for these twelve groups was conducted by Communication Technologies of San Francisco. Participants were informed during recruiting that the purpose of the discussion was research and that their comments would be recorded and reported to a client. All participants were paid an incentive of \$35 for their attendance, and each group lasted approximately 150 minutes. All groups were held in a professional focus group facility and moderated by Jeffrey C. Henne.

SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

SUMMARY

This report summarizes key findings from twelve focus groups held with San Francisco gay/queer/bisexual men. Two groups were held in December 1992, and the remaining ten groups were held in January 1993. All groups were held in downtown San Francisco, and they were segmented so that each group consisted of different types of men.

What Do You Like About Living in San Francisco

Most men liked living in the San Francisco Bay Area, with many men mentioning the weather and the city's beauty as reasons for living in or near the city. Many men spoke of San Francisco as a "gay mecca" or a "dream." For most men, this meant that they had "escaped" from somewhere else and moved to San Francisco -- in part because they felt free to live their lives openly as gay/bisexual men in the Bay Area. Many young men indicated that they had only recently moved to San Francisco.

Many men spoke of the city's cultural diversity as something that they liked about the city. This was especially true for men of color, who felt that they were not looked down upon as a result of their ethnicity. Men who were HIV-positive or who had AIDS felt that San Francisco offered them the best treatment available, and many of these men indicated they had moved here because of these reasons.

Best Thing in Life

Men in these groups indicated that many things were going well with their lives. Some were happy to be in relationships, while others were happy to be out of relationships. Others felt good about their jobs or where and with whom they were living. For some men -- especially those who were HIV-positive or who had AIDS -- simply being alive was something that they felt good about.

The Election of President Bill Clinton

Almost everyone was extremely hopeful about the election of Bill Clinton as President of the United States. The last groups were held the evening of January 19th -- before the inauguration on January 20th and the ensuing media attention surrounding gays in the military. Nonetheless, these men felt that a powerful change had occurred, one which would mean more funds for AIDS and a raising of America's consciousness in regard to gay issues. The word "hope" was used by several men, and it was clear that most men expected major changes to occur.

Things That Are Not Going So Well

As might be expected, there were also many things that were not going so well in the lives of these men. It was interesting, however that many men spoke of problems at work, or problems with a living situation, or problems with a boyfriend or being able to find a boyfriend, before they mentioned HIV as a problem. Of course, dealing with being HIV-positive or living among many friends who were HIV-positive or who had already died was mentioned as a problem, but it was not often the first problem mentioned in the group.

Those men who had recently seroconverted seemed to be having an especially hard time dealing with their HIV-positive status. Many of these men seemed angry, and mentioned several problems associated with being HIV-positive, including entire days spent at medical offices, attempting to determine from whom they might receive care, and dealing with issues surrounding insurance. On the other hand, those who had been HIV-positive for a greater length of time seemed to have dealt with these issues.

What Would You Change

Many men, when asked to name the single thing in life that they would change if given the chance, mentioned things like housing, employment, or financial security. Although some men did indicate that they would change their antibody status, or "get rid of AIDS," many men indicated these would not be things that they would change. It seemed as if AIDS was so much a part of the lives of these men that it was beyond the realm of possibility to even imagine a world without AIDS.

Many men who were HIV-positive felt their HIV was "under control," and felt that they were getting on with their lives. On the other hand, those men who had recently seroconverted seemed angrier about their diagnosis, and were quicker to say that they would change their antibody status if given the chance.

Community

With the exception of young men and African-Americans, most men felt comfortable identifying with the gay or queer community. As might be expected, there were several men who said they identified with the "community of man," or the "community of humans."

About one-third of all men said they felt more comfortable identifying with the "queer" community rather than the gay community. For many of these men, the word "queer" denoted "different." In each group, however, many men did not identify as queer, seeing the word as being "derogatory," "young," or "confrontational."

Young men felt very alienated from the gay community at-large. They looked upon the Castro as everything that was wrong with the community, talked of how disappointed they were with the Castro when they first arrived here, and felt that it was an "elitist zone." When they heard the words "gay community," young men tended to think of "older" elected officials with whom they did not necessarily bond with, such as Harry Britt or Carole Migden.

Latino and Asian men said they identified more with the gay community than they did with their respective communities of color. For many men of color, there was no one monolithic "community of color" any more than there was one "gay community." African-American men were not as likely to identify with the gay community. Many African-American men seemed alienated from the gay community, and many of these men said that they were more likely to identify with the African-American community than with the gay community.

Among Latino and Asian men, many participants felt that, more and more, Latino men were seeing other Latino men, and that Asian men were doing the same. Not one participant in the group of African-Americans thought that this trend was discernable among African-American men.

Many men felt that one of the major changes that had occurred over the years had been the inclusion of Lesbians as part of the community.

How Has Worry About AIDS Changed Over Time

The "worry" that men felt about AIDS seems to have changed over time, depending on a variety of factors, including age, antibody status, when a man discovered he was HIV-positive, and to some extent whether or not someone had been a caregiver to a person with AIDS. Except for young men and those who had recently seroconverted, many men were less worried and less scared about AIDS than they had been previously. HIV-negative men seemed more sure that they would not become infected, and HIV-positive men seemed to be hopeful about living healthier for a longer amount of time. For many men, living with HIV did not seem to be the death sentence that it had previously been seen as.

Those who had recently seroconverted seem to be more concerned, and as might be expected, that concern was primarily for their own health and well-being. Younger men also seemed more concerned than they had been in the past, as they become more aware and more educated about the disease. It should be remembered, however, when young people were asked this question, they were comparing how they felt as adults with how they felt when they were teenagers.

HIV-negative men seemed to be reacting in several ways. Some HIV-negative men were having more sex, because as the epidemic goes on, they felt less paranoid about the sexual activity they were engaging in and more confident that they

would not be infected. Other HIV-negative men, however, seemed to be reacting by having less sex, in part because they felt a tremendous amount of pressure to remain negative as the epidemic goes on. HIV-positive men were also feeling pressure, but the pressure for many of these men was to not infect anyone else with the virus. As the epidemic goes on, many of these men indicated they were getting tired of "protecting" everyone else.

For many men, learning that a friend was HIV-positive, dealing with the death of someone from AIDS, or providing care for someone who was ill continued to affect them in powerful ways. For most men, the epidemic seemed much "closer" to them when they were dealing with the sickness or death of friends, and it was "farther away" when they were not dealing with the sickness or death of friends. Many men did speak of how they had "gotten used to" dealing with those who were sick and dying, and for some men, this did not appear to have the impact that it had had previously. For many men, however, these were still powerful events, and the intensity of the feelings depended on the closeness of the person involved.

Concern of Those Who Are HIV-Negative About Becoming HIV-Positive and the Anxiety of Those Who Are HIV-Positive

Even though many HIV-negative men said they were less paranoid about having sex, these same men said they expected that one day they would become HIV-positive. In part, this seems to be based as much on activity they had engaged in in the past as it is on their current sexual activity. Many of these men seemed to believe that it was inevitable that they would one day test HIV-positive. For many of these men, the concern was not really about becoming HIV-positive, but an anxiety about why they were not already HIV-positive. Several men spoke of the "relief" they would feel if they were to learn that they were HIV-positive. If HIV-negative men did express a concern about becoming HIV-positive, it was a fear of losing their independence, of having to be taken care of.

Many HIV-positive men did not seem to be overly anxious about their condition. If HIV-positive men were anxious about anything, it was about how they were treated as HIV-positive men, and about what, if any treatment protocol, they should be following. Many HIV-positive did not think that HIV was the cause of AIDS, and several men indicated they had stopped taking all drugs because of adverse side effects. The exception to this were those who had recently seroconverted, or HIV-positive men who had engaged in unprotected anal intercourse. Many of these men appeared extremely anxious and angry about being HIV-positive. In contrast, many of those who had known about being HIV-positive for some time, as well as those who had remained safe, seemed to be calm and accepting of their fate.

Sense of Preoccupation About AIDS

Many men did indicate that they were still somewhat preoccupied with AIDS. For many men, this preoccupation took the form of worrying about how the disease might be contracted, with some men saying they worried about contracting the disease every time they had sex. Even though many men did say that AIDS was part of their daily lives, many men seemed to feel that the intensity of the preoccupation with the disease was not as strong as it had been in the past.

Dealing With Grief

In every group, men spoke of dealing with grief surrounding the illness and loss of friends. In each group, at least one man used the word "numbing" to describe the experience. Even though these thoughts were expressed in all groups, those who had remained safe appeared to be dealing with the grief surrounding the loss of friends better than others. These men were more likely to use phrases such as "We've gotten used to it." In contrast, those who had relapsed or who had recently seroconverted seemed to be more "tired" of going to hospitals, more "tired" of taking care of sick friends.

Why Some Men Still Have Not Been Tested

One group was conducted solely with men who had still not been tested. When asked why they had chosen to not take the test, these men gave a variety of responses. Some men felt that they had done nothing to put themselves at risk. This was particularly true of younger men, several of whom had never had unprotected anal intercourse. Others spoke of being afraid that they would get sick if they were to learn they were HIV-positive, and several men did not believe in the efficacy of treatment, so therefore could not see the point of getting tested.

Where Sexual Partners are Met and an Increase in the Level of Sexual Activity

When asked where they were meeting their sexual partners, men in all of the groups mentioned similar locations, such as gyms, bars, dance clubs, public transportation, computer bulletin boards, ads in the paper, parks, and walking down the street. In all of the groups, about one-third to one-half of the men had been to a sex club or a bathhouse in the last two years.

Many men also indicated that they had noticed that there had been an increase in the level of sexual activity that was occurring among gay men, that it seemed that men were having more sex than in the recent past.

Talking About Antibody Status and Safe Sex

In all groups, men spoke of how they simply assumed that their anonymous sexual partners were HIV-positive, and acted accordingly. Some men indicated that when asked by anonymous sexual partners, they told them to assume that they were HIV-positive -- even when they themselves were HIV-negative or did not know their antibody status.

Of course, disclosing one's antibody status depended in part on the nature of the relationship. Many men said they did disclose their antibody status if they thought there was a chance that the relationship would be a serious one. Some men spoke about the timing of such a disclosure, and said that they felt it was difficult to disclose antibody status once a sexual situation had commenced.

Some older men said that they sometimes felt a special responsibility toward younger men, and made a point of discussing antibody status with younger partners before having sex. Likewise, several younger men said that they sometimes felt intimidated by older men, and relied on them to initiate any discussion about antibody status or safe sex. Not all young men agreed with this analogy, however. Some young men thought that they were more likely to talk to older men, in part because it was often times the older man who found the younger man attractive, thus allowing the younger man to set the boundaries.

In all groups, men spoke about the importance of nonverbal communication in conveying one's intention to practice safe sex. These could include things such as bowls of condoms and posters displayed in one's bedroom. However, some men also told how relying on such signals could sometimes lead to unsafe sex happening.

Definition of Safe Sex

Many men indicated that their definition of safe sex had changed over the years. All men agreed that unprotected passive anal intercourse without a condom was the riskiest behavior to engage in, and no one thought that the risk associated with this practice had changed over the years. Several men, however, did question whether or not insertive anal intercourse without a condom was as risky.

Many men were increasingly concerned about the safety of oral sex, and acknowledged the risk of transmission through blood contact in the mouth. Although most men felt that the risk of transmission through blood contact in the mouth was not great, several men did seem to believe that transmission was occurring by this method. Several men talked of cases of seroconversion in which unprotected anal intercourse had not occurred, and cited these as the reason they were beginning to doubt the safety of some practices. Some men went as far as to say that there was no such thing as safe sex.

Why People Are Still Having Unsafe Sex

When asked why some men were still having unsafe sex, many reasons were mentioned, but in all groups the list of reasons was remarkably similar. These reasons included lack of self-esteem, not valuing the future and simply living in the present, inability to keep an erection with a condom, not having condoms available, lack of feeling when using condoms, substance abuse, having a death wish, and believing that unprotected anal intercourse was not dangerous as long as both partners were HIV-positive. For some men, HIV disease was not seen as dangerous as it once was seen, and this seemed to be a factor in some cases.

The issue of self-esteem seemed to be of particular importance to younger gay men, who in many cases felt doubly stigmatized because of their age and because of their sexual orientation.

Many men -- both young and old -- felt that there were many gay men who did not want to grow old, and that for these men, AIDS could be seen as an incredible relief. Likewise, several men felt that many young gay men ascribed to the theory of "live fast die young." For these men, "living in the moment" was more important than doing something because it made sense for the future. Several men also thought that young men in particular felt that they had "missed the party." Adding to this was the sense that "sex was in" once again, and in such an environment, it was more likely that unprotected anal intercourse might happen.

Several men mentioned the fact that unprotected anal intercourse was seen as "macho" sex, and part of the experience of being gay. For these men, unprotected anal intercourse may have been seen as a completion, or a summation, of the gay experience. Likewise, many men felt the same way about HIV disease, that being HIV-positive was the "next step" in being a gay man. For these men, the need to be part of the community, to experience what everyone else was experiencing, may have been more important than staying healthy.

Many men seemed to be simply tired of restraining themselves after years of what they saw as deprivation. When coupled with the feeling that becoming HIV-positive was not seen as the death sentence it once was, some men seemed to feel that occasionally engaging in unprotected anal intercourse was worth the risk. This seems to be especially true with HIV-positive men, many of whom do not seem to be overly concerned with reinfection. Many men also know of other men who have engaged in unprotected anal intercourse who remain uninfected. For many men, this too can lead to a feeling that occasional "slipping" is not all that risky. This seems to be an especially prevalent thought for those engaging in insertive anal intercourse.

Of course, many men spoke of how sex with condoms did not feel as good, about the need to put on new condoms if engaging in anal intercourse for long amounts

of time, of how using condoms took the "spontaneity" out of sex. Alcohol and substance abuse were also mentioned as confounding factors, as were things such as feeling depressed.

Why Some People Are Having Safe Sex

Men who had remained safe were asked why some men were able to consistently have safe sex. In a sense, the responses that many men gave were the opposite of the answers they had given as to why men were engaging in unsafe sex. A sense of responsibility was cited as the number one reason why some men were able to consistently engage in only safe sex. Some men also said that their ability to engage in only safe sex had a lot to do with a sense of self-respect. Other men indicated it was a sense of wanting to survive the epidemic.

Some young men had never had anal intercourse, and therefore said they were not conditioned to have unsafe sex. Some of these young men also said that they associated unprotected anal intercourse with feelings of guilt and "bad feelings." For some other young men, unprotected anal intercourse was simply seen as "messy."

How to Better Reach Men

In all groups, men had many ideas about how to better reach men. Several men felt that condoms needed to be more accessible. A few men mentioned that they missed the Rubbermen, and felt they had made a strong statement when they would appear in bars. Other men thought that messages needed to be more "sex positive."

Some men thought that other subjects such as "commitment" or teaching men how to talk about safe sex needed to be emphasized. A few men thought that an educational campaign targeting the city's gyms could be very effective. *

Messages That Have Been Seen

Men in all of the groups had seen many of the HIV/AIDS prevention campaigns produced by local San Francisco agencies. When asked what messages they had seen, men in all groups mentioned messages relating to safe sex, alcohol and substance abuse, and treatment. For the most part, men found these messages to be believable, and seemed to have a high regard for the agencies producing the messages. The one exception to this were young men, who felt that they were not being spoken to by their peers.

Several men spoke of the need for advertising messages to be more hard-hitting. This is not at all inconsistent with comments heard in previous discussions, although it should be pointed out that messages such as these have not always proved to be the most effective.

The Stop AIDS Project was mentioned in most groups as an effective program. Some men criticized the program for not being multi-cultural, and some others thought that the program spent too much time talking about anal intercourse. One man singled out the Project's campaign promoting 100 percent commitment to safe sex as unrealistic.

The San Francisco AIDS Foundation's early treatment campaign "Be Here for the Cure" was also singled out as an especially effective campaign. Many men felt that this campaign worked equally well as an education/prevention campaign, saying that it spoke to both HIV-negative and HIV-positive men. Even though many men liked this campaign, there were some men who felt that they would not survive the epidemic. These men were offended by this campaign, and did not find it effective.

Some men also objected to messages telling them to seek treatment because of the difficulty in getting insurance coverage. Several men also complained about calling the telephone numbers listed in many ads, and said they felt frustrated by the "run-around" they received when calling these numbers.

Perceived Problems Encountered at City Agencies Dealing with AIDS

Some Latino and African-American men felt that there were not enough services for men of color. One Latino man used the phrase "white wall" to describe what he felt he sometimes encountered when approaching city agencies. Not all men agreed that services were not available to men of color, however. Asian men did not perceive any problems, and several African-American men felt that many men of color simply did not take advantage of what was available to them.

RECOMMENDATIONS

One of the main reasons for conducting this series of focus groups was to discover how San Francisco gay and bisexual men were dealing with the AIDS epidemic, to explore how their lives have changed because of AIDS, and to begin to determine if AIDS prevention campaigns need to be re-designed. A great deal of resources have been expended to date on prevention and education campaigns in the city, and a great deal has been achieved. When this epidemic began, and when focus groups were first conducted with this population, to engage in unprotected anal intercourse was the social norm, and we have seen that norm turned completely around.

It should not be a surprise to anyone that there are still men engaging in unprotected sex, but rather that so many men have adapted and remain safe. None of the early efforts were meant to last the "long haul," but rather to stop unprotected sex as quickly as possible. No thought was really given to what it would take to change that behavior for an entire lifetime. In the short term, these efforts have been widely effective. The incidence of unprotected anal intercourse has been significantly reduced.

What has not occurred, and what needs to begin to happen, is to begin to lay the groundwork for the next decade of AIDS prevention, and to begin looking at the problem from a much larger perspective. These focus groups, hopefully, can serve as a starting point for that discussion, and hopefully, action. *

One of the clearest things to emerge from these focus groups was how similar everyone was. We went to great lengths to segment these groups into different populations, in an attempt to determine differences between different types of people. Of course, we did find differences, differences along lines of ethnicity, differences between young and old, differences between those who are HIV-positive and those who are HIV-negative, differences between those who have just recently learned they were HIV-positive and those who have known for several years. But just as importantly, we learned that many of these men, regardless of where they fell on the above spectrum, were very similar, and had similar responses to many situations and questions. Perhaps we have spent too much time in the past addressing the problem as separate pieces of a puzzle, instead of looking at it as one big whole. This is not to say that specialized campaigns are not sometimes necessary, but rather that there are many issues of concern that are common to all. It may be time to begin to rely on segmentation to test messages and to conduct research, as was done here, but not to create a separate message for as many community segments as possible. *

Another important issue that needs to be addressed are those underlying issues of community, of self-worth, of anti-discrimination, of love of oneself. These are big issues, but they need to be dealt with if we are ever going to begin to attack this

problem in more than a piece meal way. We need to begin to deal with the underlying discrimination against gay men in this society that leads to low self-esteem, that leads to estrangement from families, that leads many men to come to San Francisco in the first place. Many men come to San Francisco to escape their pasts, and to find the "Emerald City." However, in finding it, the underlying problems that led them here remain unaddressed, and many of these problems lead them to not place a high value on their lives. When life is not valued, people will do seemingly stupid things, like engage in unprotected anal intercourse. Perhaps a campaign needs to be mounted that is more "life focussed," and less "sex focussed," a campaign that deals with commitment, and maybe not commitment to safe sex, but commitment to life, to oneself.

It is more than apparent that in San Francisco, men know that unprotected anal intercourse is the riskiest behavior. This tenant has been the keystone to AIDS prevention in the city, and it needs to be constantly reinforced through a variety of different media, with traditional advertising campaigns as well as some more non-traditional approaches. Many men spoke of the seeming overwhelming availability of condoms in New York, how condoms are available in every bar or club in that city. Why isn't a similar approach being followed in San Francisco? The results from these focus groups suggest that making condoms and lubricant available in the bars and the clubs would be widely acceptable.

Many men also spoke of the Rubbermen, and wondered what had happened to them. This also seems to have been a very popular program. The Rubbermen were sexy, hot, erotic, they used condoms, and they were out in the community as a reminder to use condoms. They reinforced the message to use condoms. Again, why can't this program be reinstated?

A few men also talked a great deal about nonverbal communication as a way of preventing unsafe sex. They spoke of men displaying bowls of condoms next to their beds, or having safe sex posters in their bedrooms as ways of letting potential sex partners know that they only wanted to engage in safe sex. Some past advertising campaigns have used posters that could effectively convey such a message about condom usage. Just because something has been done once does not mean it can not be done again. Some things may be worth repeating or adapting for additional use. It needs to be remembered that there are several different audiences in San Francisco: 1) those who have been in San Francisco for the duration of the epidemic, 2) those who have moved here from other locations, and 3) those who have come of age since AIDS. It always needs to be remembered that there are new men arriving in the city everyday.

If posters or bowls of condoms in bedrooms send the appropriate message, then maybe such ideas need to be promoted. The Stop AIDS Project's "100% pin" could be seen as such a nonverbal program. Some men did not think this program had been successful, however, in part because they did not believe that 100%

was realistic -- they had a million excuses that added up to less than 100%. Excuses such as I'm in a monogamous relationship, excuses such as we are both HIV-negative, excuses such as we are both HIV-positive, excuses such as I'm a top, I'm negative, but I can have unprotected anal intercourse because tops don't get infected. Simple campaigns that stress "100%" get caught up in all of those situations, and when men find one piece of information that they do not believe, they disregard the whole thing.

It may be time to get away from the "30-second sound bite" of advertising and to go back to the more informational-based campaigns that were used effectively at the beginning of the epidemic. Such a campaign could be used to address some of the above-mentioned issues surrounding the safety of anal intercourse. There were also many questions raised about the relative safety of other sexual practices besides unprotected anal intercourse that could be addressed in such a campaign. There is some anecdotal information "on the streets" about men becoming infected from oral sex, from exchange of blood when kissing. We need to remember that gay men read the mainstream press just like everyone else. They see the stories about transmission in a dental office, and it causes them to wonder just like it causes the general public to wonder. Any campaign that we have mounted, or will mount, is not produced in a vacuum, but rather is received with all of the other information from every other source that we have no control over.

Many of the issues that need to be addressed are bigger than AIDS. But if these issues are not addressed, we will never be doing anything but putting band-aids on the problem. The election of Bill Clinton seems to have filled everyone that talked to us in these groups with a great deal of hope. This may be a once in a generation opportunity to do something to raise the self esteem of every gay man in this city and in this country. Some other issues that could be raised include:

- We need to address the issue of aging in this community. We are part of a culture that celebrates youth, celebrates beauty, and has no place for older men. What is the attraction for someone now in their 20's or 30's to living to be old men? What do they have to look forward to? Many of them look at old age, and do not see an attractive future, but rather a future of being unattractive, unwanted, lonely, and say, "So what if I die young?"
- We need to address the needs of young gay men and teenagers. Even in San Francisco, the supposed "gay mecca," young people are scared to come out, scared to be themselves, and feel alienated from the older community.
- We need to address the issues of men of color, who feel doubly discriminated against because of their ethnicity and because of their sexual orientation.

- We need to address the issues of HIV-positive men. They do not seem incredibly anxious about being HIV-positive, but they are confused about what treatment protocol to follow.
- We need to address the issues of HIV-negative men. Some feel guilty that they have not tested HIV-positive, some feel like they are just waiting to test HIV-positive, some are feeling increasingly worried that they will do something at this late date to get infected.
- We need to address how HIV-positive men are referred from one agency to another in this city. What telephone number do people call, how can we be sure that they receive good information, how can we be sure that they are handled in a timely fashion?
- We need to address the issue of community, and make gay men feel that they are not only part of the gay community, but part of the community of mankind. If this does not occur, and men see an increasing number of their friends and loved ones infected and dying, it only becomes "natural" that everyone will be eventually infected.
- We need to continue to address the issues of alcohol and substance abuse in the gay community.

Finally, we need to find a way to empower men to imagine a world without AIDS. For many men, this currently seems impossible. Many men spoke enthusiastically about the "Be Here for the Cure" campaign as one that did give them hope for the future. Anything that is done to address any of the issues mentioned above needs to do it in a way that gives men hope.

OVERVIEW OF FINDINGS

What Do You Like About Living in San Francisco

Regardless of what may have been going on in their lives, participants liked living in the San Francisco Bay Area. Most men felt that living in or near San Francisco was exciting and gratifying. In all groups, participants spoke of the city's beauty and weather as reasons for living in the Bay Area. Several men also mentioned the city's public transportation system as a positive aspect about life in San Francisco, and a few men even mentioned the city's architecture as an enjoyable aspect of city life.

For many participants, living in San Francisco was like "arriving at the end of the rainbow." Among young men, many had just recently arrived in the Bay Area. Many participants used words such as "a dream" or "gay mecca" to describe the odyssey that brought them to the city. For many, the "dream" was their ability to live as an openly gay man, as this participant said:

Well, (it is) a dream in the sense that when I first knew about San Francisco and its openness for the gay population, I knew this was where I had to come. I more or less discovered myself. (HIV-Negative)

This man agreed:

(It's) the freedom (to live) the gay lifestyle that you want to live. I'm originally from Alabama, and the things that I do here are just taboo to do there. They're still living back in the 1940's . . . There are so many different places to go, so many programs that you can take advantage of. (African-American)

Another man also agreed:

I think the one thing that I like the city for is how I discovered what gay pride is like. I've talked to friends who live in other cities and they don't really know what it's like to be totally gay, and not have to feel sorry or feel bad. This city, you can be totally gay and really live the kind of life you want to live and make no excuse for it. And where I come from, something like that is totally alien. You always have to hide. You almost have to live a double life. And in this city, really if you don't want to, you don't have to. But that is what I love and like about the city. The whole thing about gay pride. (Asian)

For many men, living in San Francisco was "empowering." As this man said:

It's very empowering to move here and to notice that there's so many people here--gay people who are at work and out and talk about their boyfriends at work. In a large financial company where I work, most of the gay men are out. That's so heartening. (26 to 35 Years of Age)

For many others, including this participant, the sense of cultural diversity found in the city was also something they liked about San Francisco:

The more I've lived here, the more time I've spent here, the more I've realized how critically important community is in terms of providing all sorts of assistance and support. I guess not only for people of the various sexual orientations, but also in terms of racial diversity. And political diversity. (Asian)

This man agreed:

I think the cultural diversity (is something that I like). The more that I leave San Francisco, travelling and everything, the more I want to come back. And the more I realize what a pleasure it is to be here. And that there's nowhere else in the world that I want to live. (Relapsed in Last Year)

For men of color, the city was a place where they were not looked down on because of their ethnicity. One man said:

When I first moved here, the one thing I liked about this place was that I didn't feel so differently Asian. I was going to school for six years in Illinois, and I got so tired of having to explain where I came from or why my skin color is this way. And one of the things I liked about the city is the fact that I think people are so accepting here of who and what you are. And just because you're different doesn't mean you're abnormal or something like that. (Asian)

Another man agreed:

You know what I remember when I first moved here, the first time I got on a bus, I sat down and you know, certain people look at you with all of their different attitudes that they have towards you without knowing you, and I just remember thinking on this particular bus on this particular day, that nobody was looking at me because I was queer and nobody was looking at me because I was black, they had their own problems. I felt so liberated by that. (African-American)

Many men who were HIV-positive or who had AIDS came to San Francisco for better care and treatment, as this man said:

I knew that the manner in which (San Francisco) could deal with my HIV was different than what was in Sacramento. I'm not saying that the care was necessarily worse in Sacramento, but it was just not as pervasive. I didn't feel confident that my caregiver had seen what a caregiver in San Francisco would have seen. (Seroconverted in 1991 or 1992)

This man concurred, saying:

I stay because the resources are here, all the better doctors, and I don't have to deal with . . . as much of the ignorance as I probably would in other places. (HIV-Positive)

Best Thing in Life

Participants spoke of many things that were going well in their lives, including being in or out of a relationship, or finding employment or housing. Younger men seemed to be more likely to mention a good job or a good living situation than were older men. Some men were grateful for simply being alive. If these feelings were expressed by HIV-negative men, the feelings seemed intertwined with feelings of grief over those friends who had already died. Among those men who were HIV-positive or who had AIDS, those who were grateful to be alive often felt a sense of wonder, as if they were surprised that they were still alive. Some HIV-positive men even said that testing HIV-positive was one of the best things in their life.

For many men, the best thing that was happening in their lives was being in a relationship, or in some cases, being out of a relationship. One man said:

About ten months ago, I met a guy through a computer bulletin board. It turned out to be such a wonderful relationship. And this is after being involved in so many damaging (relationships). And I'm his first boyfriend, and it's kind of wonderful to have that experience . . . So that's what fuels a lot of my energy—the relationship with him and the fact that he's a really good guy. (Asian)

Another participant agreed:

My relationship that I got into is the best thing. It's the first one that I'm serious about because usually I make out and then leave them. This is someone that I'm compatible with and somebody I'm in love with and that I

can get jealous about if I'm walking down the street and somebody looks at him, I'm like, "What you looking at?" I'm jealous. (African-American)

Like this man, for others, being *out* of a relationship was just as important:

I would say a lack of a relationship (is a good thing). The relationship that I had for seven years was nothing but a drug relationship. (HIV-Positive)

For many men, stability in work and in housing seemed to have been a problem in the past, and those who had found good jobs or a stable living situation cited these as good things that were happening, as this man said:

For me, I'm glad I finally have decent housemates. It's taken me a decade to find some people that I feel like I can have as family and trust, who will pay the rent and not rip things off, and not come home stoned or drunk or bring some people who are going to smash the house up. And that's what I'm grateful for. (Relapsed in Last Year)

This man felt that he had finally found a decent job:

Last year when I moved here it was very, very hard to find a job. I came here in December and I finally got a job at Church Street Station, which was hell. Then I looked for work for about six months again and then I left and I went back up north because I was painting for some friends up there, and I came back and I got two jobs within probably five days (of each other) . . . I have something stable to make money on which is very important. (Do Not Know Antibody Status)

This man who had AIDS spoke about how glad he was of his support network:

I was really sick this time last year and I was really amazed at the network of people I had that would support me. It was like no questions asked, nothing, they were just there for me, and I've never had that before in my life. (African-American)

This HIV-positive man said that testing HIV-positive was one of the best things that had happened to him. As he said:

I'm learning about myself. Learning and growing. And I take advantage of all the opportunities. I'm reducing stress, I'm learning how to say 'no'. I'm learning how to cut out people who are toxic in my life, without hurting them. But how to take better care of myself. I wish I could have learned all these lessons in another way, but I don't think that I could have. So a lot of people may not agree with me, but for me (being HIV-positive) is the best thing that could have happened. (More than Thirty-five Years of Age)

For many men, simply being alive was something that they considered good. One man said:

Yeah, I'd say just the fact that I'm alive. I mean, I'm going to have outlived all my friends. It's a very strange feeling at thirty-eight. Just to look back and to just realize that I've survived everyone. In fact, everyone I came to town with in the '70's. It's a very sobering kind of a feeling. But it's good. (Remained Safe)

Another man agreed:

I'm alive, literally. Considering all the news that comes about every day, you learn someone is ill, someone has died. And you just thank God you're here. (Relapsed in Last Year)

A few participants, like this man, spoke of relations with their families as something that was going well in their lives:

My mother called me New Year's Eve to wish me a happy New Year. And she'll call me every once in a while just to say, "I'm just calling to say hi", and it . . . seems like she's going out on a limb to just really be there. And I haven't even told her of my status yet. (Seroconverted in 1991 or 1992)

The Election of President Bill Clinton

In many groups, participants spoke of the election of Bill Clinton as a good thing. Even though this question was one that the moderator routinely asked, in most of the groups the information was volunteered by someone before anyone was specifically asked about the election of the new president. This man said:

Well, it was such a shit of a time with the recession, and now it sort of feels like we're coming out of it. We've got a new president, and the future just seems brighter. I actually feel as if something will be around in five years. (HIV-Negative)

This man agreed, saying:

I tried not to get into a big hysterical thing on election night. You know, I tried not to get all excited. I tried to really just push it off. And it's like it was thrilling that I voted for somebody who won. It's weird because people have been running around saying, "Hope is a dirty word," but I'm into hope at this point. I have experienced so much despair and crummy life for a couple years . . . A promise to fully fund the Ryan White Care Act mean a big fucking difference in terms of dollars, in terms of the dollars that will

come in the services to this city, and I'm a consumer of a lot of those services. So yeah, I think that certain things will change. (Less than Twenty-five Years of Age)

This man thought that President Clinton would be a real leader:

What I'm finding, what I'm beginning to realize more and more is that Clinton is much smarter and much better and much more capable than I thought he was. I had a very high opinion of him when I voted for him, but from what I've read recently, the man is brilliant. He reads three or four hundred books a year and he has an incredible way with people. He's a real leader. I think he's going to be another Roosevelt. (More than Thirty-five Years of Age)

This man spoke of how since President Clinton's election, gay issues are making headlines nationwide:

Well, we're in the forefront of all the media. Whenever in political history have gays been a topic? (Latino)

Things That Are Not Going So Well

In all of the groups, participants spoke of many things that were not going well in their lives, including trouble finding jobs, trouble finding a relationship, trouble dealing with friends dying, or trouble dealing with their own illnesses. Interestingly, however, many men did not immediately speak of their illnesses or the deaths of friends as things that were not going so well. In several groups, the first response to this question was similar to the response of this man:

What's not going good? Finding a job isn't going good. Nobody wants to hire anybody that hasn't worked here in the city before. And I've been working full-time for four years. And I put on nice clothes and take off my makeup. (Less than Twenty-five Years of Age)

This man agreed:

It's been really chaotic (at work) . . . We've been going through lots of layoffs. And even though I've been promoted through all that time, it's still kind of disconcerting not knowing whether in a couple of months our company's going to be open or not. Seeing the people I've become friends with, knowing they're on the list of the next round of layoffs, is really disconcerting. (Remained Safe)

This HIV-positive man was concerned about whether or not he could work a full-time job:

Well, one of my concerns is that tomorrow I have a job interview, and I'm not sure that I'm well enough to work a standard nine to five type of job. And that's a concern because I need the money that a full-time job would provide, and yet I really probably am not quite well enough to work that type of job. (More than Thirty-five Years of Age)

Another man spoke about not being able to find someone to be in a relationship with:

Just being alone for the rest of my life concerns me. Not finding a significant other who would be my perfect significant other. Some of my friends have told me I have to lower my standards, but I don't think I should lower my standards, I just wish I could find someone who would fit my standards. (Do Not Know Antibody Status)

Even though living with HIV or among those who were sick and dying were not the first issues raised in most groups, they were certainly issues that a lot of men were dealing with. At times, it almost seemed as if living with HIV was such a given by most men that it almost did not need to be mentioned as something that was not going well. Many men agreed with this man who mentioned HIV as something he wished was not happening:

Sometimes I wish I would stop being HIV-positive, that it would just go away, but it doesn't. And, you know, not too many people I know are dying right now, but it would be more fun if it didn't exist. (Relapsed in Last Year)

For many participants, living with HIV was a problem. This seemed to be especially true for those men who had only recently seroconverted, who often seemed angry about their recent diagnosis. As this man said:

Embarking on all of the tests that I'll have to take. I was just stuck and prodded and drained all day today. I'm having the complete HIV day. I had my blood work this morning for the first time, and of course takes sixteen hours for them to do. And now, you know, this group. And after this there's another group I may go to. So getting into the cycle of things. It's a form of education, and I'm not necessarily looking forward to it. And it is kind of making me angry. I mean, I can talk a very nice story about it, but when it comes right down to it, I'd rather just deny the whole thing. And that's kind of protectional or something. (Seroconverted in 1991 or 1992)

While talking about things that were not going well in his life, one man spoke of the "run-around" he was receiving from city agencies since he had been diagnosed with AIDS:

I would say, going through a lot of stress with one AIDS organization to get help and having other people tell you they can help you, they can help you, and when you get down to it they couldn't do a damn thing. You know, they say, "Oh yeah, we can do this, you qualify for this." And I try to (get it), and they said "Oh, you're not sick enough," and I go, "Fine." You know, you've got to be sicker than a dog to get help at some of these agencies. You've got to be almost to where you can't go, can't physically do anything. (Seroconverted in 1991 or 1992)

Other men mentioned caring for people with AIDS and watching people die as problems. The feelings expressed by this man were mentioned by someone in each group, regardless of the antibody status of the speaker. As this man said:

What's not going so good for me is that probably the closest friend I ever had is in the final stages of dying from AIDS, and we have just brought in his mother to take care of him around the clock. And trying to be there not only for him, but for his other half. His family's very tough. (HIV-Negative)

This man said his relationship with his family was not going well for him:

Well since everybody seems to have these idyllic relationships with their families, you know, I do NOT have an ideal relationship with my family. My father gives lip support to me, he has not ever been understanding of my homosexuality. HIV is nothing but a potential drain on his retirement income. My mother totally wiggled, and we don't communicate at all since I tested positive, and that's almost been two years. And that was just a real fucked-up, dysfunctional relationship anyways, so it's probably better not to be in my present. But I think I feel really bad that biological family support isn't there . . . There's something really basic in me that wants that. That doesn't exist. That isn't there. So that's really what I feel the worst about. (Seroconverted in 1991 or 1992)

This man agreed:

Another worry for me is going home for Christmas and dealing with my family. I come from a split family, and Christmas is always really tense. And it's going to be real hard, or at least it has been the last couple Christmases. (26 to 35 Years of Age)

What Would You Change

In all of the groups, participants were asked what they would change in their lives if they were given the chance to change one thing. Surprisingly, with the exception of those who had seroconverted within the last two years, most participants did not mention HIV or AIDS, but rather things like jobs, relationships, and financial security, as this man said:

Well, I'd like to have more money. I don't think money is the answer to everything, but I'd like to find out. (African-American)

Many HIV-positive men were asked directly why they did not choose changing their antibody status. This man answered:

I think if you had asked that question fifteen months ago, I would have probably said health. But right now a support has grown up around my HIV. Because I was in denial since 1987 about it. Today I can talk about it. (HIV-Positive)

Another participant agreed:

Well, my first inclination was to write that I wish I was HIV-negative instead of positive, but in a lot of ways I'm fine. I'm not sick, I'm going to the doctor and see him regularly. But when I found out I was HIV-positive, I was very very devastated. But it also brought me so much closer to so many people. It helped me bring down all these barriers, these blockades that I put up, that wouldn't allow me to be intimate. Or go beyond just some superficial relationships with people. (Remained Safe)

Some men, however, said they had not mentioned AIDS because they were overwhelmed by it. As this man said:

I'm kind of overloaded with it. And I think I'm more numb to it right now. For the last three months, I've had eight or nine people die. And I did a lot of personal work around HIV and AIDS and was a Shanti volunteer. And I just have--I have so much loss and grief going on all the time that it's kind of that old friend that's always there. It doesn't shock me, it doesn't really scare me anymore. I've had so many people who were negative for a long period of time, now, convert to positive that it's almost a given. And, you know, that's--it's like you do what you do, and you do your best and let go of the consequences. (26 to 35 Years of Age)

In the group of men who had recently seroconverted, many participants seemed angry and said that they would like to change their antibody status. One man said:

Being gay and HIV-positive (are the things that I would change) . . . The main thing I'm worried about is that I'm the last one with my name in my family. Who's going to carry on my name? Nobody. When I die it's done. I'm thinking maybe I'd rather get married and . . . I've been thinking a lot about this. I haven't had a good gay life. It's been hell. And now with this it just makes it worse. But I'm dealing with it, I've made some good friends. But if I could change things, I'd rather be the other way. (Seroconverted in 1991 or 1992)

This man wished everyone could be HIV-positive:

I want everyone in this whole world to be positive. Then we wouldn't have to worry about who's positive, who isn't. Everybody's positive and that's it. I think everybody needs to feel that . . . to treat everyone with dignity and respect and kindness, and that tomorrow might be your last day on this earth. And you know, people out there beeping their fucking car horns, trying to get down the road, or yelling at each other, let's love each other. And it does make you love life more when you have some sort of illness. (Seroconverted in 1991 or 1992)

Community

In all of the groups, participants were asked which community they identified with. With the exception of young men and African-Americans, most participants said they were comfortable identifying with the gay or queer community.

As might be expected, many men objected to being forced to define the community that they identified with. Several said they were part of the "community of man," or the "community of humans." One man said:

With me it depends on who I am dealing with. You know, if it's on a business level, if it's on a sexual level, if I'm in Mission, if I'm in Pacific Heights . . . I'm not only from one ethnic group but from several, and I grew up with several different cultures. And . . . I've never been able to feel that I'm only one. It depends at that given moment. (HIV-Negative)

This man felt as if he was part of the gay community, but also part of "mankind." He said:

I would say part gay community, part just general mankind, because the gay life is not the only part of my life. It's part of my life, but it's not the whole piece of the pie. (HIV-Positive)

For many men, being part of the gay community did not necessarily mean agreeing with everything about the community. This man said:

I find myself identifying with the gay community, but yet there's so many things I disagree with. And a case in point is how the local gay papers still continue to run unsafe sex ads in the classifieds. And I read them all the time. And this has been going on for years. And I just find it a very unconscionable thing to happen. Even though I can identify, I can't agree with a lot of what's happening. (Remained Safe)

Some Men are More Comfortable Using the Word Queer

In all of the groups, approximately one-third of the men said they felt more comfortable as part of the queer community rather than the gay community. Many men said they had never felt comfortable with the word "gay." One man explained:

The first time I was called a queer, I didn't hear the negative attached. I thought of it as being different. And it was only later that I got all the negative stuff. There was something about gay that I found horrid to latch on to. And now that queer has come back, I really like it. And I think it's a much more encompassing term than gay. Gay means to me, the ghettos, and a kind of inclusiveness that shuts out a lot of others. (HIV-Positive)

Several men spoke of the roots of the two different words, with "gay" being equated with "happy" and "queer" being equated with "different." For these men, the word "queer" seemed to make more sense:

To me queer always meant different . . . As far as I'm concerned I'm pretty different and queer doesn't bother me at all. (Do Not Know Antibody Status)

Several men also spoke of how the words were used as different parts of speech, with "gay" being used as an adjective, whereas "queer" was used as a noun. This man explained:

What I mean by "I am part of the gay community" is that I go to the gay club, I work out in the gay gym, I have a lot of gay friends. But it was meant more as an adjective. (Remained Safe)

Several men talked about how using the word "queer" to define themselves was a way of taking a derogatory term that had been used against them and turning it around, as this man said:

I just love shafting straight America with their own weapon. And that's why I like it the most. Because I was called queer enough as a kid, and now, "Back at you." (Seroconverted in 1991 or 1992)

A young Latino man agreed:

I think I like queer because it's all-encompassing. It's lesbians, it's bisexuals, it's transgender. Everything. And I think it's taking that word back. Because I've been called a queer all my life, and finally I turn around and go, "Yes I am!" That weapon. I took it away from them. They can't hurt me with it anymore. (Latino)

Some Men Are Not Comfortable Using the Word Queer

In each group, however, many men did not identify as queer, seeing the word as being "derogatory," "young," or "confrontational," as this man said:

(When I hear) queer community, I always think of Queer Nation, or somebody that's really radical, and sort of not in the mainstream of what I consider the gay community. I don't particularly think that I fit into the queer community. I feel more comfortable with gay community. (HIV-Positive)

Another man agreed:

"Queer" tends to have a militant tone to it, which I don't consider myself. I'm very moderate. So it's a little bit uncomfortable for me. (Asian)

One African-American man, who identified "queers" as "very young activist white kids," nevertheless said he had "no problem" with what they were doing. This man agreed, saying:

I don't identify with the younger, queer, radical community, but I support very much what they do, because they get out on the streets and demonstrate. And they've made some real changes. And in the '60's, I was in their position, in Chicago, founding gay liberation and doing some of the same things. I know how it feels, it's important. (Remained Safe)

For some men, the word "queer" was inclusive of all, as this man said:

It is inclusive to everyone, until it starts five years from now it'll be queers and lesbians. (Seroconverted in 1991 or 1992)

This man, however, did not agree:

The only thing that I don't like about that word sometimes is the only people who use it are these overly-politicized people, (who use it) as an exclusionary term. (Seroconverted in 1991 or 1992)

What Community Young Men Identify With

Many young men seemed to be alienated from the gay community at-large, complaining that the community was elitist and that the Castro represented everything that was wrong with gay culture. As this man explained:

I think San Francisco lacks queer spaces in the full sense of the word, places where there are men and women who are interesting, are full personalities. Where you're not going into a fuck bar. The Castro is just like the epitome of everything that's wrong with gay culture. It's just white male, upper-class snots who want their little house in the suburbs with their dog and cat and their domestic partner. And, I mean, I'd like to bomb the Castro like any day. When I came here I thought the Castro was going to be sort of really radical, cheap, have interesting cafes, and people just swarming down the streets, and all this art going on in the center of activism in the city. And I walked down the street and I thought it was a shopping mall. (Less than Twenty-five Years of Age)

Another man agreed:

Yeah, I was so disillusioned. I expected it to be a haven for everyone, and I expected everyone to be so happy. And I got there in 1990, and there were people doing actions on this bar because people of color were being totally harassed and asked for two and three and four I.D.s and being overcharged for drinks. It made me really sick that it was a totally elitist zone . . . A youth center is what's missing, where there's a library, where there's places to hang out, where there's coffee, and where it's really open. You know, someplace where people can just interact as they will as people. Where there's no alcohol. (Less than Twenty-five Years of Age)

This young man thought of "old" and "political" when he heard the words "gay community." He said:

I don't identify with the lesbian and gay community, because that to me means Carole Migden, Harry Britt, the political, just older people who aren't going to let younger people in. (Less than Twenty-five Years of Age)

Nevertheless, even young men who felt more comfortable with the word "queer" used "gay" at some points in the discussion. This man, who said he identified with the word "queer," nevertheless used the word "gay" as well:

I think that being gay, that has become my culture. I think that it's kind of neat to be gay because everyone that's gay is part of your family . . . I can appreciate the different cultures, but I really just consider gay people as part of the same family, regardless of their race. (Latino)

Community for Men of Color

For men of color, the issue of community was further influenced by how they related to their respective ethnic communities. When asked directly which community they felt most comfortable with, most Latino men said they were more comfortable within the gay community, as this Latino man said:

I read, speak, and write Spanish, but I interact primarily in the gay community. That's my whole culture. And the Latino culture is there, but I don't feel that entrenched in it. If anything I've assimilated. (Latino)

Another man agreed:

I feel like it's easier to be Hispanic in gay culture than it is to be gay in Hispanic culture. My mother is Hispanic, but my father is not. So I grew up not in a very hispanic community. And my boyfriend is half black and half white. So it's like we share the fact that we're gay, and that's . . . all we really share. It's the community that I feel closest too. (Latino)

This Latino man, who felt that he had suffered more discrimination because of his sexual orientation, felt more comfortable with the gay community:

I'm totally gay every day walking down the street. No one says, "Oh look at that Mexican," they say, "Look at that queer!" (Latino)

For Asians, the issue seemed to be more difficult. Although most Asian men *said* they were more likely to identify with the gay community rather than any Asian community, most of these men *spoke* of the discrimination they had suffered because of their ethnicity -- both from society in general and from the gay community as well. This Asian man said he felt more discriminated against because of his ethnicity and hence tended to identify with the Asian community more than the gay community:

I identify myself with the Asian first because that's the most obvious thing about me. That's the first thing they see about me. Being gay, I had to work at it, and fight it and stuff like that, and everything else. I fit with the Asian community better, I think. With whites I always feel kind of like . . . different. With Asians I just feel very at ease, just very comfortable. (Asian)

Another Asian man came out with the help of a gay/Asian organization. To him it was important to integrate the two parts of his life. As he said:

When I came out, I felt it was like a double whammy, because not only was I put down or discriminated against for being Asian, but also they could get me for being gay. And that's something that I had to deal with when I was first coming out . . . I joined a gay/Asian group that helped me . . . confront it and to deal with it both at the same time. (Asian)

Asian men also spoke of the stereotypes within the gay community about gay Asian men:

There's a myth, I guess an unfounded myth, an unproven myth that supposedly Asian men have small penises. Therefore, those out there

that are size queens, they refuse to date Asian men. That's one misconception. Two, I guess I've dated a few of what they call rice queens. And they have this misconception . . . I didn't feel like I was treated like a person. I was treated more as an Asian, someone exotic. I think that was the word they used. And I felt different. I felt like I was this sheltered doll . . . some sort of inheritance. Something that they owned. I guess that's another prejudice. (Asian)

Another man agreed:

Yeah, I always loved this line when they say, "Well, I've never dated an Asian before." And they're, like thirty-something, forty-something, and they think that's a compliment. (Asian)

Most African-American men said they felt more comfortable within the African-American community than within the gay community. This man said:

For me it's, oh hell, I may as well, I choose the African-American community because I don't care what happens to me, I always go home and they'll take care of me and I don't think that I'm being prejudiced about it, I'm just comfortable with it. (African-American)

One man explained that he also felt it was easier within the African-American community when relationships were not defined as "gay" relationships:

Up until the time I came to San Francisco, my men, the guys I went to bed with, were "straight/bisexual" men. I got here and you know it's like, "Oh, if I want a man to love me he's got to be gay." You know, it's been five years since I've had sex and I've got this thing that I've got to find this gay man . . . I think that I could find a man, live with a man, and he'd be there to put me in the ground if he was young enough and I lived. We wouldn't have to talk about whether I was gay or he was gay and all that stuff. And he'd still be the man that I love! And we'd still be living a "gay" existence with two men in one house taking care of business of being family. (African-American)

For many men of color, there was no one monolithic "community of color" any more than there was one "gay community." This African-American man said:

Being Panamanian, we have a very low opinion of American blacks. There's a big difference . . . because a lot of us from Latin America, we completely do not identify with black Americans, because they are

about as foreign to us as a white American is to a white European. And there is a lot of animosity between us. (HIV-Negative)

An Asian man concurred:

Among gay Asians there's a lot of bickering, fighting. I'm from this country, you're from that country, or whatever. And I want to be better than you, you want to be better than me. You know, there's a lot of jealousies. And having to deal with that, then having to deal with the fact that . . . you know, this really is a white world. (Asian)

This man thought that identification with an ethnic community had as much to do with whether or not a person was born in the United States as anything else:

(Filipino) people that were born and raised here basically dislike people that were born and raised in the Philippines. Because they just don't have anything in common. I find I have more things in common with people that were born and raised here. (Asian)

Several men of color felt that it was seen as a "status symbol" to have a white boyfriend. This was especially true among African-Americans. As this man said:

There is a difficulty in establishing a relationship with an African-American gay male who is interested in a relationship with another African-American gay male . . . It's not that I separate myself from any of the races because I get along with most people as individuals, and yet, when I look in the mirror I want that, I want what I see, you know I'm looking at me and I want to fall in love with me, and I have difficulty with that in San Francisco because it seems that the blonde hair, blue eyes, is the ideal even for the African-American gay male in San Francisco. (African-American)

Another African-American man agreed:

If you ever go through the Classifieds in the *Sentinel*, the *BAR*, *Bay Times*, all the black men that are advertising are looking for white male lovers. I've never seen an ad by a black man that wanted a black lover. (African-American)

Asian men felt that they were seeing more and more Asians dating other Asian men. As this man said:

I find in this city that I've been seeing a lot more Asian men with Asian lovers. And I think that's great. In San Diego I've never seen anything—I mean, there wasn't a lot of couples that were just totally Asian. There were Asian-white, Asian-black, Asian-Hispanic. I think it's great. I used to be just totally attracted to white men, and I find it a sign of maturity that I'm finding other races more attractive. (Asian)

This trend was also noted among Latino men:

I think there's a trend going on in which Latinos are getting away from Americans, and starting to involve themselves more with their own race . . . They've realized that the cultural differences have created a lot of agony in their life. A couple of years ago it was very common for my Hispanic friends to be with Americans, and I had my American husband and everything, and that was because the difference in culture attracts, opposites attract. Now I think people are starting to try and make their lives and their relationships much easier to get along with, and finding that the culture difference is just too much to deal with. (Latino)

Several men felt that among young people, it was much more common to see a real mixture in terms of ethnicity than it was among older men, as this man said:

I don't see a whole lot of older (men of color) . . . in the Castro community . . . When you go out to clubs, people about thirty and under, there's a huge variety, there's lots of different people and they all get along. I get along with all of them. (Do Not Know Antibody Status)

Changes in the Community

In several groups, men felt that the community was more educated about AIDS, gaining in political power. Several men felt that the community was not as "depressed," was more "relaxed," and that the community as a whole was just "more fun." As this man said:

It's more festive. Five years ago is when I started losing everyone I knew. And so everybody was still mourning. Everything was still AIDS AIDS AIDS AIDS. And now it's, you know, just more fun I think. (26 to 35 Years of Age)

Many men agreed with this man who felt that the community was more inclusive of lesbians than it had been in the past:

Men and women—gay and lesbian are being more together than they used to be. Because it used to be they didn't like each other. (HIV-Positive)

Several men also felt that the community was more "accepting" of divergent lifestyles. As this man said:

Now you can see somebody who's into drag with somebody who is a punk. Before it was not that way. Before, all of the leather ones were together, the drag queens were over there. Now it's different, because they are younger and they have accepted it as part of the gay or homosexual or queer community. (More than Thirty-five Years of Age)

This man thought that there was more attention being paid to "family" than had been in the past. He said:

I see the blur between heterosexuals and homosexuals and everything between lessening. There was a time when you could pretty much say heterosexuals tend to get married and have families, homosexuals don't. Today . . . family is definitely part of the plan. (HIV-Negative)

This man felt that the "gay community had come back into the fold of humanity." As he said:

The gay community has kind of finally come back to the fold of humanity . . . We've decided to rejoin the world, rather than hiding in every bathroom and every corner alley. This isn't the way things are done anymore. In the straight community or the gay community. . . And it's like kids today are a little smarter than that. Most of them. And that's what they take with them. They take that higher education . . . I see it as being more just the integration of it, the whole city, that we're becoming one city, one country again. (More than Thirty-five Years of Age)

This man agreed, drawing a parallel going back to the Milk/Moscone killings. As he said:

When you go to a place like the Twin Peaks Bar, they all were still talking like Moscone just died yesterday. And all that just finally ended. It's like we're sitting through some sort of a real shock. I moved here in '85. And it's like it didn't seem to rebound for a while . . . It seems like all those people went into some sort of a shock when

all that happened. And then everybody started dying all around them. And it was like, it took a little while for the city to recoup. (More than Thirty-five Years of Age)

How Has Worry About AIDS Changed Over Time

In all of the groups, the worry that men felt about AIDS was different, dependent in part on their age, their antibody status, when they discovered they were HIV-positive, and to some extent whether or not they had been a caregiver to someone with AIDS. For many of those men who were HIV-negative and had been sexual before the onset of the epidemic, there did seem to be some acceptance of the disease, and AIDS did not seem to be as omnipresent as it had been in the past. One man said:

I worry about it, but I'm less worried about it. I'm living with it. So seven years ago, eight years ago, I was more scared of it. But now . . . I'm not HIV-positive, but it's been around us for ten years. And now I'm not scared of it anymore. I protect myself. It's not doom and gloom for me. (HIV-Negative)

This man spoke of how many men had gotten used to the epidemic:

I remember the days when everything had to be washed in bleach because you did not know what this thing was. The first time I saw my first patient that was covered in KS, he could hardly even open his eyes at the time. Nowadays you don't see that. We have learned what it is, how to deal with it, you know, much better than before. (HIV-Negative)

Some men also spoke of a sense of "hope" that was felt, as this man said:

I think half the battle is your state of mind . . . being positive, doing something. That's why when I was first told I was positive, my attitude was different. You know, things have changed since then. I think there's hope, with all the different tests that they're doing and everything. So I try to keep a positive attitude. I go to school. I don't deny I'm HIV-positive. But I've been HIV-positive since 1987, and I haven't been sick yet. So I go to school and look forward to the future. (Latino)

Many HIV-positive men, like this participant, seemed more likely to believe that AIDS was a manageable disease. As this man said:

I've known I was positive for two and one half years, and I have to say I feel more at ease . . . The more I learn about it, the more I feel comfortable about it. I don't know, just dealing with HIV and losing all your friends is

difficult to begin with. But the more I learn about it, the more I'm at ease about it. I used to be a real basket case about it . . . Well, when you have HIV there's a lot to learn . . . Like when you first find out, the first thing you want to do is grab all your credit cards, go put them to the limit. Just party hardy, because you don't know if it's going to be your last party. See, now I know I can continue with life. I've got a good ten years to live . . . I can talk about it more openly with my friends and loved ones. (Relapsed in Last Year)

When asked when a vaccine and/or cure might be available, most men felt that by the turn of the century substantial progress would have been made. Several men thought there would be a vaccine as early as next year, whereas a few men did not think a cure would ever be available.

Not everyone, however, felt hopeful, and some men spoke of the sense of "sadness" in the city. This man said:

There's an undercurrent of unhappiness in the city, because a lot of people have it or have friends who have died of it, . . . and you get tired of that. (Latino)

For some men who were HIV-negative, there seemed to be an incredible amount of pressure to *remain* HIV-negative, as this man explained:

Every time I take the test, it makes me realize that I've gotten this far, and I'm still going. I feel like the more I go on, the more I gamble . . . The first time's okay, the second time's okay, the third time it's going to get you. I just get this feeling that I'd better start being more and more (careful). I mean, I am careful, but I'm now getting to the point where I don't even want to have sex. Because I feel, "Okay, I've been safe up to this point, don't fuck up." (HIV-Negative)

For some HIV-negative men, like this man, the pressure to stay negative meant that they were having less sex:

I've become much less sexual. And sex isn't particularly fun for me anymore, because even though intellectually I know safe sex practices, there's always that fear that I'll contract it . . . Somewhere in my mind I've decided that if I stay away from sex there's no way that I can contract it. I think the fear has gotten worse. And it's not so much a conscious fear . . . Intellectually, I know all the do's and don'ts. But it's internalizing somewhere, and I just avoid . . . situations. (Remained Safe)

Another man agreed:

It's constant. Every time I wake up in the morning that's all you see on the news . . . I back away, I'm afraid, I don't care how safe (I am), the best way to not get it is to not do it, and that's the answer that I have now. Don't touch me. (African-American)

For HIV-positive men, the "pressure" seemed to be to not infect anyone. This man spoke of how he got tired of protecting other people:

Before I was HIV-positive, I was really concerned about not getting infected. Now that I am infected, I don't feel as much of an urgency to be extra-careful. Meaning, like, the oral sex issue. I used to give in just once in a while. And now I'm like, "What's the big deal?" And at first I was still so worried about other people. Now I'm sort of sick of worrying about other people, I just want to enjoy myself a little. (Relapsed in Last Year)

The weariness of always protecting others was also evident in this man's voice:

I'm a human being. I'm not a God. I try my best not to share this with anyone. As much as I buckle my seat belt and drive the car and try not to hurt anyone. That's all I can do. (Seroconverted in 1991 or 1992)

Some HIV-positive men spoke of how they initially put their lives on hold upon learning that they were HIV-positive. Many HIV-positive men, however, spoke of how they were getting on with their lives. As this man said:

I've been positive for quite a while, and I've gone through depression and total celibacy to impotence to where I couldn't even masturbate. And finally it just dawned on me that people around me were dying from other things . . . So then I say, "Look at this, my life is going on, and I'm sitting here on hold." So I just said fuck it. (HIV-Positive)

Several men indicated that they were less paranoid about having sex, and were therefore having more sex than they had previously. As this man said:

I used to be extremely paranoid about AIDS, to the point where I was paranoid about having any kind of sexual involvement, because I was just so paranoid not knowing what was safe. And often after having sex with someone, I would just feel paranoid. And I think that's changed a bit, and I'm a little bit more relaxed as far as my sexual practices are concerned . . . Things like oral sex I would never even consider two years ago. (Relapsed in Last Year)

This man agreed that he was less paranoid about having sex than he had been in the past, and felt that education was the key:

Well, it's kind of changed from probably five to seven years of paranoia of not doing this, not doing this, living a whole life of "No no no no no" into living a life of being more educated and educating the people around myself. I'm an advocate. Okay, you don't have to be monogamous, you can be promiscuous, but promiscuity does include being safe. And so I'm very obnoxious with that, to some people very obnoxious with that. And so I've gotten more from the just living scared to living smart. (Asian)

Among young men, several men said that an increased awareness and education about the disease had caused them to be *more* worried now than they had been when they first learned of the disease:

I'm a little more worried now because when I was younger, you just didn't think of it as much. I'm more worried about it now, I guess. I have more information. (Less than Twenty-five Years of Age)

This young man was more scared now, because he realized that as he got older, he felt it was easier to make "mistakes" than he had thought:

When I first moved here I was twenty-one, so I was completely in denial. I thought, well, it'll never happen to me, it could never happen to me. I'm lucky I'm so young and that I know safe sex guidelines now. And then as I got older, I realized that I made mistakes. And I didn't think I would make a mistake. And I'd freak out, I'd say, "Oh my God I made a mistake."
(Relapsed in Last Year)

Several younger men felt that their "worry" about AIDS had not changed. These men had heard of AIDS long before they became sexually active or had even known they were homosexual, and they felt they had successfully incorporated knowledge about AIDS into their lives. One explained:

It doesn't change. I have always been worried about AIDS. Since I read my first article on AIDS and homosexuality, and the way it was linked to homosexual practices when I was in high school. Way before I came out. Maybe five years before I came out. AIDS has always been linked to homosexuality. That's probably why it took me so long to come out . . . I guess I've grown more worried ever since I came to San Francisco and started dating like crazy. And I started reading more about AIDS . . . I'm very reluctant to practice sodomy to begin with. (Remained Safe)

Those who had recently seroconverted were more worried about their own health and well-being than they had been in the past. As this man said:

HIV is definitely a big issue, and it's affected me emotionally, and it's colored everything since I found out in August . . . I am so irritable at any little thing. I can be on the bus riding home, and it would be crowded or I'll have to wait, or I'll miss the bus in the rain, or I mean, any little thing that normally you can handle, I'll just go nuts over it. And I had just gotten to the point in my life, where I was, like, mellow, you know, and happy with where I was and who I am, and I'm an okay, mellow, happy person. And now I'm just reverting back to this raving bitch. (Seroconverted in 1991 or 1992)

Many men talked of the epidemic being closer or further away from them in terms of concentric circles, depending in part on who they currently knew that was sick. This man spoke of how his views had changed because his lover had gotten sick and died within the last five years:

Well it's changed dramatically for me. I was very happy in a relationship all that time, and not really doing anything about it. We had one friend that died, but he was just so distant, I really didn't feel anything. He died. We went to the funeral, and went back to our lives. And when my lover came down with it, it was like everything came crashing (down) . . . And sex to me now is almost so mechanical, you know. "Do you do this? Do you do that?" All these questions. It's not even natural anymore to me. (Asian)

Another man agreed:

Well, five years ago, I really didn't have any friends here that were gay. Some of the friends that I have now, I'm finding out through word of mouth that they're either HIV-positive or they have AIDS . . . And that's what I mean that it's starting to hit closer to home, when I'm finding out about these friends who have the disease or are positive. And it just feels so much different than in '88 when it wasn't a concern, when it was political, and not really something I worried too much about. (Asian)

This man's level of concern was less, because he presently knew fewer people who were sick:

For me the circle five or six years ago was periphery people, not people central in my life. And then it became very central. My best friends, my support system, my lover, his best friends, all dying. And now it's back out to people I've known in the past that are not central in my life. (HIV-Negative)

This man spoke of how it would "start and stop." As he said:

It goes to a point of remission. Then it starts up again . . . it gets still sort of for a while, sort of almost getting under control. Then it will start up again. (More than Thirty-five Years of Age)

Concern of Those Who Are HIV-Negative About Becoming HIV-Positive

Many HIV-negative men seemed resigned to the fact that they would one day test HIV-positive. This man had been a member of the gay men's chorus in the early 1980's and said:

I remember reading the first story in the *Chronicle* about AIDS when I was sitting on the plane with the gay men's chorus here when we were ready to leave SFO to go on the national tour. We were all joking about it. And so many of those people are now dead. And so that was June of 1981 to January of 1986 when I took the test. All that time I assumed I was positive. Because, you know, I had zillions of sex partners, and so many other people in the chorus had already gotten sick. So I was just worried about when I would get sick. Then I found out I was negative. So since then it's been about worrying when I will turn positive. I've been tested nine times. (Remained Safe)

This man, who's lover died of AIDS, said they had regularly engaged in unsafe sex, and said he would feel "relieved" when he finally would test HIV-positive. As he said:

I have survivor's guilt because I'm still negative . . . I still had unsafe sex with him. And that went on actually for a while. And when he died, I went and had my test. I go there periodically every four months. And I am still negative, and I'm not sure why. But in the back of my head I figure if it happens to me, who better person to have it than me? Because I've been through it, I know everything about it. Maybe it will be some kind of relief. (Asian)

This man also felt like he would eventually test HIV-positive:

I want to tell myself that I'm not scared, but at the same time, I've made it a habit to be tested on a regular basis for the last five years. I'm still sticking to safe sex practices, and what are so-called safer sex practices, and the safest sex practices, but you know . . . even when I go through a period of time where I'm not doing anything at all, there's still this concern. (I expect one day to be positive). Only because it's drummed into my mind already that by the year—I don't know the statistic exactly—by the year

whatever that every adult at such age will be diagnosed as being HIV-positive. So I kind of feel like one way or another I will become a statistic. But in the mean time, I'm going to be smart about it. Dodge the bullets. (Asian)

Those who had just recently seroconverted all said that they had expected to test HIV-positive at some point in time, as this man explained:

I had always figured it was inevitable . . . that it was a matter of time. That it could be dormant in my system . . . I'm not a fatalist, I wasn't looking forward to that happening. But it just seemed like the chances were greater than they were not. (Seroconverted in 1991 or 1992)

Many HIV-negative men said that the only reason they were HIV-negative was "luck" or "destiny." As this man said:

It's a matter of luck. Because in '79, I still remember quite vividly, January of '79, I began to hear so-in-so had high fever, and then he died. And very quickly it began to spread. Among people that I knew, people that I worked with. We had no idea what this was. And, I mean, in '79, January of '79, I mean, I was active. Okay, I was doing everything under the sun, and enjoying it and being happy-go-lucky. And why didn't I come down with the virus then? (HIV-Negative)

For many men, the fear was not so much the disease itself, or even dying, but having to be taken care of. One man said:

It's not so much the death for me . . . I just don't want the quality of my life to go as I have seen other people's. It totally diminishes to the point where if my life would become like that, I would kill myself, because I don't see the purpose of living any longer. (African-American)

This man agreed, saying:

Getting sick and having my lover change my diapers is one of my anxieties. Or getting sick and dying, and then leaving someone with the whole burden. That stuff does go through my head. (Latino)

Anxiety of Those Who Are HIV-Positive

With the exception of those men who had recently seroconverted, many men who were HIV-positive did not seem to be overly anxious about their condition. In fact, many of these men indicated that they had been more "scared" or "anxious" about testing positive than they were after they received their results, as this man said:

I think all the anxiety was before I tested positive. I knew I was in the high risk group, and I tested maybe five times and I was negative. And it's that constant thought, you know. Finally when I turned positive . . . I went through a lot initially, but my attitude's different. I just try to keep a positive attitude, just go on with life. I think being negative, and getting that first test, and waiting for the results, you really go through it. (Latino)

If HIV-positive men were anxious about anything, it was about how they were treated as HIV-positive men. This man spoke of his inability to find a boyfriend:

The first thing that a lot of people ask, "Are you HIV-positive?" Do you stand there with your chin sitting on the floor, or do you say yes? If I say "Yes," they say . . . "Okay, we can just be friends." I would never lie to someone. Sex is not the first thing on my mind, but again it's not the last thing . . . It's been very hard for the last two years trying to find someone. Because of my HIV status. (HIV-Positive)

Another man agreed:

Yeah, I always get rejections from people. Because basically when you do put out there that you're positive, you know, people will have this instant shock wave . . . Oh yeah, it's happened to me. My goal was, you know, I wanted to go and have sex with this person. So I'll be honest, tell him that I'm positive and everything, and I have condoms in my pocket. But it lags on. "Well, let's stop and have coffee first." "Well, let's stop in this place first." And that just keeps going on because that person really doesn't want to be with me because I'm positive . . . I don't like being rejected, especially when I'm honest. (HIV-Positive)

Some HIV-positive men were anxious about what treatment, if any, they should undertake. Several HIV-positive men had stopped taking any medication. One man said:

I have a lot of friends that are with me on the fact that being tested early is more or less the cure. Being tested and finding out that you're HIV-positive, changing your life. They don't have any more questions. They're not getting sick, they're not going back to the doctor, they're not carrying on with the AIDS medications that are just toxic. (HIV-Positive)

Many HIV-positive men questioned if HIV was the cause of AIDS. As this man said:

I am one of the . . . group that believes that HIV isn't the cause of AIDS. It can be a factor, but it is not the cause of AIDS. You can go back and

there's not one definitive study done, and I dare anybody to find one, that proves that HIV causes AIDS. (HIV-Positive)

Sense of Preoccupation About AIDS

Many men indicated that they were somewhat preoccupied with AIDS. For many men, this preoccupation took the form of worrying about how the disease might be contracted, as this man said:

Actually I've grown more and more preoccupied lately of AIDS occurring without unprotected anal sex. All those dentist cases. Even unprotected oral sex. Or rashes or something like that. (Remained Safe)

This man spoke of how whenever he had sex, he would worry about the sexual activities he had engaged in:

Every time . . . you do something that's maybe slightly risky, there's just all these bad things in the back of your mind. Did I risk too much? Am I putting myself at risk? Is this really stupid? (Relapsed in Last Year)

This man indicated that AIDS was a part of his daily life, but that the intensity was not as strong as it had been five years ago:

I'm HIV-negative, and my lover is too, but it's an everyday part of our lives. We do a lot of volunteer work . . . so it's like every day. It's like in the newspapers, in the news, it's on the phone. Someone calls and says, "God, I've got to take my AZT." So it's every day. It's something there when you wake up, there when you go to sleep . . . It's not as much (as five years ago). It was real intense five years ago. Only because that was during the time when I lost quite a few friends. (Latino)

Several men indicated that AIDS had simply become part of their lives, as this man said:

AIDS has become a part of my life. So it's not like I'm preoccupied with it, it's like hearing the nightly news. It's just a fact. (Relapsed in Last Year)

Dealing With Grief

In every group, men spoke of dealing with grief surrounding the illness and loss of friends. However, although many men expressed these feelings, it seems that men who had remained safe were dealing with these issues better than those who had relapsed or who had recently seroconverted.

In each group, at least one man used the word "numbing" to describe the experience. One said:

It's numbing, but I also get a lot of strength out of it from certain people . . . Some of my friends who are very ill, just holding on for whatever it means to them, gives me strength and makes me realize how unimportant certain things are. And being able to help them gives me strength, too . . . And at the same time I have to numb myself and see them suffer in that way.
(HIV-Positive)

This man agreed:

I think there's a numbness at times that sets in. You're so inundated. You're hearing everything constantly. See friends get sick . . . I find I get very angry that this has happened to people so young. But yet as far as myself, I think there's a certain numbness that's come over me. (Remained Safe)

And another man said:

You become anesthetized over a period of time . . . You become numbed. Because of the rapidity, because . . . it's just all part of the process.
(Remained Safe)

This man was concerned about how people had just gotten used to others being sick and dying:

We've gotten used to it. That's a scary statement, I guess. It's not something that you want to admit that you're getting used to. It's so much a part of your daily life. (Remained Safe)

This man agreed:

(Dealing with sick friends) was pretty much a shock five years ago, today it's kind of a fait accompli. (Do Not Know Antibody Status)

Several men used phrases such as "it's a fact of life" to describe how they felt. As this man said:

It has become a fact of life. It's here, it's happening. I cannot change it. So I have to live with it. After seeing so many friends die, one more nowadays hardly makes any difference. Everybody has gone . . . Sometimes I fantasize that it is not happening. (More than Thirty-five Years of Age)

Several men felt that they were tired of going to hospitals, tired of taking care of sick friends. One man said:

I find I'm getting a lot more angry about it, resentful of the loss. And this is a very difficult thing for me to say, because I consider myself a caring person, but resentful that it takes all that energy to care. And to know that they're going to die. (Relapsed in Last Year)

Another man agreed:

I'm still giving and caring and doing and taking them places, but emotionally I'm seeing a change . . . I resent more and more . . . I have feelings of futility. It's like why am I investing all this energy? They're going to die. (Relapsed in Last Year)

This man spoke of how he used humor to help him deal with the epidemic:

I like to make jokes once in a while, you know. Like, yeah, you know, it's awful, but I've got one buddy, and I make jokes about people who are dying. I'm laying out my cynical side, but, you know, sometimes the jokes are sort of funny . . . We'll just make jokes. Sometimes I pop an AZT in front of somebody and I go, "Hey, don't want to miss that extra twelve minutes." You know. Just that sort of thing. (Relapsed in Last Year)

Some participants who had recently seroconverted found it difficult taking care of sick friends because it made them think of their own situation. This man explained:

It's significantly harder (now to deal with sick friends). I've known people who've gone through the HIV spectrum going from as healthy as I am right now to their death bed. And now it's all of a sudden . . . I fit on the calendar. And I don't want to deal with being on the calendar . . . I guess I do what I'm obligated to do. And I'm talking about one person in particular, where all I need to do is collect his mail and take it to the hospice. It's a very simple thing to do. And I have to sit outside and erase all of those lines off my face before I'll go inside and give him his mail, because I don't want him reading me. You know, it used to be very simple. It used to be, God I was high on the mountain, and doing good things for good people. And now it's not always some other person that I'm looking at anymore . . . So there's a lot of mirror stuff happening. (Seroconverted in 1991 or 1992)

Another man was sad that he would never know how some of his friends would be as they got older:

Some people achieve a kind of dimension they didn't have when they were young, some people just get sillier as they get older. And that's one of the things . . . There's no ending chapter. We'll never know how it turned out other than that we died. (Asian)

Some men said that dealing with grief would sometimes make them want to have sex. As this man said:

I think he's right that sometimes when the grief gets so big, you just want to go out and do something that will make you feel good and happy, and not think about the consequences. So I'm not saying that it would necessarily change what I would do, but it might prompt me to go out and have sex. Because you might get that nice feeling afterwards. Somebody might actually hug you and hold you for a little while. (26 to 35 Years of Age)

Why Some Men Still Have Not Been Tested

One group consisted solely of men who had not been tested. When asked why they had not been tested, these men described three major reasons: 1) they had done nothing to put them at risk, 2) they feared they would get sick if they were to learn they were HIV-positive, and 3) they did not believe there were drugs that could control the disease.

This man did not believe he had done anything that would put him at risk:

I think the reason I haven't been tested is because I've known what I've done and I have always been safe. (Do Not Know Antibody Status)

Another man felt that if he were to learn that he was HIV-positive, he would soon get sick:

I sort of want to cross that bridge if I feel I'm going to need to cross it, and not because I'm being marketed to go and test, to find out . . . For me, I think there's this psychological thing of self destructiveness, this fear of individual sabotage if I find out . . . I know people from both ends. People that find out and they do O.K. and they really take care of themselves and then there are those who really go down the tubes because they do too many drugs or too much testing or become guinea pigs. (Do Not Know Antibody Status)

Yet another man doubted if there were drugs that could manage the disease:

I know the cure for this thing . . . but there's nothing that I see out there that is something that I would want to put into my body. (Do Not Know Antibody Status)

Where Sexual Partners are Met and an Increase in the Level of Sexual Activity

When asked where they were meeting their sexual partners, men in all of the groups mentioned similar locations, such as gyms, bars, dance clubs, public transportation, computer bulletin boards, ads in the paper, parks, and walking down the street. In all of the groups, about one-third to one-half of the men had been to a sex club or a bathhouse in the last two years.

In many groups, men said they did not like to go to bars. One explained:

Bars are not easy places to communicate, really. Especially with the smoke and the noise. For me, I can never understand anything anybody says. So what I do is smile and nod. Somebody could say, "I'm going to take you outside and stab you and kill you", and I would sit there and go, "Uh huh, uh huh." . . . I used to go to the bars, now I go to parties and I go to Raves. Everybody used to be drunk, and when you're drunk your attitude changes. You aren't the person you normally are. I used to get drunk a lot . . . Now I don't drink very much . . . But I used to be a different person. And I used to take advantage of that for the fact that it was a lot easier to say yes, it was a lot easier to go home with someone. (HIV-Negative)

This man said he could just walk out on the street and find somebody:

I walk out on the street if I'm looking for something. If I want it, I can have it. And, like my roommate says, if you can't find a dick in the city, then you might as well just move out. This is the one city where you can get it anytime, anywhere. (Asian)

In all of the groups, men felt that men were having more sex than in the past, as this man said:

I do want to say, and I think there are two parts. It has changed enormously. I think about maybe five or six years ago, the first five years of the epidemic, it was like very down. People were moving out of the city. Nobody was having sex. I think it's a little scary now. I find that a lot of people are having sex. A lot of people are having unsafe sex. On one level, I'm really glad that people are having sex. It is a little scary that they're having unsafe sex. And as the oldest queen at the table, part of what I

sense is dangerous, people just decide that anybody over thirty is infected, anybody under thirty not infected. (Asian)

Another man agreed, saying:

Around 1985, I started helping manage a phone sex service, which I was involved with for three years. And I really watched the whole community just stop. If you were practicing anything besides cover it with cellophane—the appearance was that people were extremely concerned and so phone sex became a real outlet for all of that. And what I've seen happening lately is that it is sort of like, "Well, we want to be sexual, here's the information." Maybe you don't get AIDS quite as easily through oral sex, so, you know, I'll take that chance. And I can still get fucked as long as they're using a condom, and condoms are better than they used to be, so I don't need to worry so much about them breaking. And I see that sort of trend, and I know that's the same with myself, that I can kind of feel comfortable with this amount. Although one thing that I see a little bit of and hear from some people I know who are younger than I am, who are like just in college, that really surprises me, this attitude: "Well, we're young, we've never fucked with the old fogies, and so we're safe." And I have friends talking about orgies and stuff, and I'm just like, "You're doing what?" (Relapsed in Last Year)

A few men indicated they were not having sex. As this man said:

I'm asexual by choice. I don't feel I should have sex with anybody to expose them because of the fact that I won't wear a condom. (HIV-Positive)

Talking About Antibody Status and Safe Sex

In all of the groups, most men said they assumed that their anonymous sexual partners were HIV-positive, and did not feel the need to ask about such a partner's antibody status. As this man said:

Personally, I don't ask. And they don't tell me. I just assume everyone is HIV-positive. And I act accordingly. (HIV-Negative)

This man agreed:

Somebody shared with me a wonderful thing. I think they learned it from doing the hotlines. Where they said, they picked up this idea of treat every situation as if the person that you're going to bed with is HIV-positive. And if you're doing safe sex, then you really don't even need to discuss it.

Because half the time, people are going to lie anyways. If they really want to sleep with you, they're not going to tell you. So the best thing to do is just to have safe sex, and it doesn't matter what comes out of the mouth, verbally. (Asian)

Another man doubted the efficacy of learning a person's antibody status, because he felt that people lied:

Also I've realized that people lie. If I ask a question they can poker-face lie to me . . . I do practice safe sex now, but before it was if you don't have HIV or whatever, it was like, then we don't have to use a condom. But I've also realized now that people lie. (HIV-Negative)

Of course, disclosing one's antibody status depended in part on the nature of the relationship. This man would tell only those men with whom he thought there might be a chance of a serious relationship:

If I know it was going to be serious relationship, I would bring that news right up front. If it was strictly a sexual thing or that's as far as it was going to go, I would not disclose it unless something was going to happen that was going to be unsafe. And if they asked me, I would definitely tell them yes. So those are the situations. (HIV-Positive)

This HIV-negative young man would not disclose his antibody status when he was having sex in a sex club, whereas if he were going out on a date he might be more inclined to do so:

I get most of my sex in a sex club or one of those anonymous places. I've had people while we're having sex, maybe we'll take a break because we're really into each other and we start talking. We've had sex. We've had some sex, at least. And we start talking for whatever reason. And we start chatting back and forth. And they say, "Well, can I ask you, what's your antibody status?" I think, "Why do you want to know? Is it going to make you do something different? Are you going to kiss me now? Are you not going to kiss me now? Are you going to kiss me harder? Are you going to use your tongue more? Are you going to give me a blow job? Who cares? Assume I am positive and that's the way it is." And that's what I say. And I won't tell them. I will not tell them. Now, if I was on a date or something like that, I'm sure to share that kind of information, but not at a sex club. (Relapsed in Last Year)

Some men spoke of how difficult it is to talk about antibody status just before having sex. One man said:

With the man I've been seeing for many years, we'll talk about it, but only in a situation that's outside of sex. We won't ask it before having sex. Which is why I will ask. I'm not comfortable asking when sexual tension is building, because it just brings up thoughts of death, you know. (Remained Safe)

Another man agreed that disclosing one's status was difficult once a sexual situation had started:

I've done it one time during anticipatory sex. And that's the hardest by far. I mean, once the first article of clothing came off, then disclosing my status became infinitely more difficult. And that if I was clothed and there was still some question as to where the evening was going, then it was much easier, it was much more on my own terms. (Seroconverted in 1991 or 1992)

This man spoke of how he felt he had a "special" responsibility toward younger men. He said:

I think if I meet somebody who is younger than me I always like to tell him that you should assume that I'm HIV-positive and I assume that you are and then we move on from there. My really major concern is that I wouldn't want to infect anybody, so I often talk about it . . . I talk about it with anybody but actually with younger guys I feel more responsibility to them. (Do Not Know Antibody Status)

Some younger men told of how they had difficulty talking about antibody status and safe sex with older men. One man said:

If people are older . . . in their thirties . . . I guess I feel weird bringing it up. I don't know why exactly. Maybe because they were here before AIDS existed. (Less than Twenty-five Years of Age)

A young man agreed:

Well, I kind of feel that way, because I feel like I don't know enough—I don't know how the whole thing works, I don't know how the whole safe sex thing works. I know how the whole sex thing works, but . . . so . . . I guess it's kind of hard for me to keep my boundaries in certain situations. And so, like, I might be willing to compromise that with an older man. I think with just . . . someone in general that I thought was, like, better than me in some way, and that's why I stay out of those situations. I don't do that. (Less than Twenty-five Years of Age)

This young man felt that he was more likely to be careful with an older man:

I'm just the opposite, actually. It's like, with older people . . . I'm more careful with older people, because they've been around, because they've been sexually active longer. I mean, I'm super-careful anyway, but with older people I'm more wary that they'll have a better chance of being positive because they're older, and just because they've had more experience, and just the more experience you have the greater your chances are. (Less than Twenty-five Years of Age)

Another young man also felt it was easier to talk to older men, in part because they really wanted to have sex with him, and he could set the boundaries. He explained:

It's about power. Generally, if it's someone older, they've approached me, and I just feel like someone more powerful than them. And it's easier for me to talk to them. Or say, you know, set limitations, or say what I want . . . When I'm with someone my own age, I just feel like it's harder. There's just more narcissistic tendencies. And blocks that are, like, put up, that make it harder to talk to someone your own age. (Less than Twenty-five Years of Age)

One man spoke of how he used safe sex posters and bowls of condoms next to his bed to help him get the message across about safe sex. He said:

I've come up with what I think are creative and humorous ways of disclosure . . . Visible things are easy. I mean, just, like, condoms sprawled out all over the place. Just stuff that people can see and get . . . aesthetically pleasing posters of men around your house and stuff. (Less than Twenty-five Years of Age)

This HIV-positive man, however, told of a similar episode in which nonverbal communication really did not work:

I found this guy I really liked, and I was assuming he was positive, because I let him initiate everything so I wouldn't have to feel so guilty. I have the condoms out there on the nightstand, but he started without, so, great. Then the next day he tells me he was negative, and I really started freaking out over that. (Relapsed in Last Year)

Definition of Safe Sex

Many men spoke of how their definition of safe sex had changed over the years. All men agreed that unprotected anal intercourse was the riskiest of practices, and

that this fact had remained unchanged for many years. However, over the past few years, many men seem to be increasingly concerned about condoms breaking, about the risk involved in oral sex, and in the risk of transmission through blood contact with bleeding gums or sores in the mouth.

Several men felt that they had seroconverted because of sexual activity other than anal intercourse, as this man said:

When I was negative, I was always scared that oral sex might be more dangerous than everyone else seems to think. And I still to this day don't know exactly how I converted. And so I still think there's some risk in those things that I used to be worried about and everyone used to laugh at me about. (Relapsed in Last Year)

Many men indicated that they doubted whether or not safe sex existed. One man said:

I've never been fully sure what outside of some very tactile external processes—maybe mutual masturbation, provided there are no open wounds anywhere on your hands, or anywhere on your dick, or anywhere, I don't even know that safe sex exists anymore. And before I believed it did. Before I believed that—I even believed that oral sex was not a real great avenue for transmission. (Seroconverted in 1991 or 1992)

Another man spoke of whether or not oral sex was considered safe:

It's probably changed and then changed again. Originally I took oral sex to be unsafe and stuff like that. And then later I changed that, I felt like oral sex was totally safe. Now I'm not so sure. I thought that oral sex was safe about three years ago. I stopped thinking it was safe probably within the last six months, partially because of my lover's HIV status. He can't really pinpoint unsafe sex. (Latino)

This man told of how he could "obsess" about what may or may not have been safe sex:

The one behavior I engage in that I feel is borderline is oral sex without a condom. I don't let them come in my mouth, and . . . you know . . . I don't know how often it happens, really. I haven't really thought about it. But I think it's no big deal, you know. And I don't think anything about it. And then all of a sudden, you know, I've been sick for the past six weeks, with a cold, or with strep throat, and I think, maybe it was the guy I kissed, maybe it was the guy that sucked the dick before I sucked it. And then I just think, if I can get strep throat, what else can I get? Was there a cut in my mouth? Did I floss that morning? And then I think, I can just go into this mode if I

want to. And being the negative person that I am, sometimes I do. So I can't always say that I'm confident. Like right now, I think, well, yeah, I do a pretty good job, and I give myself a little pat on the back. And then sometimes I'm thinking, "Oh God, I sucked his dick!" (Relapsed in Last Year)

Other men, however, were not obsessing about it. As this man said:

The guidelines err on the side of caution rather than giving people a false sense of safety. I mean, I've made some decisions about things that are okay or that are safe enough, I guess you'd say. And if you called a hotline or read literature or whatever, I'm sure they would say that some of those practices have some risk. (26 to 35 Years of Age)

When asked how confident they were that what they did sexually would not transmit the disease, many men answered that they were fairly confident. However, for most men, there were "nagging" doubts about some practices that they engaged in. As this man said:

Everything you do, you can't be absolutely sure that what you're doing is going to be perfectly safe. Although the practices that I do and that my lover do, we try to be as conscious as we can, but you know, we never can tell what's going to happen. (HIV-Positive)

This man agreed, in part because he felt that the definition of safe sex kept changing. As he said:

I'm still not sure exactly how it's transmitted. I'm not sure who's lying to me and who's not lying to me and it seems like every month or every two months they come up with something new, there's a different type of AIDS, it keeps on changing, the virus changes. If the virus changes I'm sure that the way it is transmitted can also change, so it's kind of like being in constant limbo. (Do Not Know Antibody Status)

Why People Are Still Having Unsafe Sex

When asked for reasons why some men were still having unsafe sex, men in all of the groups came up with similar reasons, including lack of self-esteem, inability to keep an erection with a condom, not having condoms available, lack of feeling when using condoms, not being able to control oneself, substance abuse, having a death wish, and feeling it doesn't matter as long as both partners were HIV-positive.

Lack of Self-Esteem

In several groups, many men mentioned a lack of self-esteem as a reason for having unsafe sex, as this man said:

It has a lot to do with respect and caring about yourself and others. I remember a couple years ago, hearing about a man in Houston that had the disease, or had AIDS or something. And he was going out and he was screwing all these people. And the cops were trying to catch this guy, and they finally caught him. But it has to do with that—he didn't not respect himself to begin with. (HIV-Negative)

The issue of lack of self esteem seemed to be particularly evident among young men:

I don't want to get into pop psychology, but I think some of it's about self-esteem. Because I look at the big phase in my life in 1985 and 1986, while I was running around having all this unprotected sex, and I wasn't even there. That's stuff that's come up since then. All this stuff about my sexuality and my issues. But, I did not value my life enough to prevent myself from getting up totally blasted and ending up as a receptacle for somebody else . . . People are so affectionless, people want so much (to be loved). (Less than Twenty-five Years of Age)

Another man agreed:

I mean, I think it's similar to drug use . . . The lower your self-esteem, the more risky your health behavior. And I think especially if you're young. People who are younger . . . have less self-esteem, because we live in a country where young people are treated like shit. And if you're gay, and especially if you're just coming out, your esteem is really low. (Less than Twenty-five Years of Age)

This young man thought that schools need to take more responsibility for developing the self-esteem of young gay boys:

In school there was not very much education about being gay at all, and I think that has a lot to do with self-esteem. The only films that we ever saw had supposedly gay characters, and these films were about what to do if someone's trying to molest you. And those were the only stuff that we saw. And teachers can't be gay in high school. (Less than Twenty-five Years of Age)

And another man thought that men needed to learn how to love and be loved:

The whole society has to change and love one another. I mean, everybody's supposed to have twelve hugs a day, and if you don't have it as a child, you're going to be running around trying to have sex because you want someone to physically touch you and love you. And before you know it it's turned into unsafe sex. (Seroconverted in 1991 or 1992)

Not Wanting to Grow Old

Some men thought that many men simply did not value the future. One man explained:

It's all a question of the value you give to the present, as opposed to the value you give to the future. Some people just don't think much, they don't give a damn about what might happen to them. Because even if they contract the virus, it will take some time before they actually have to deal with AIDS. (Remained Safe)

This man agreed, telling of how his lover did not want to grow old:

My boyfriend is willing to have unsafe sex with me because . . . he doesn't want to live to be fifty. He doesn't want to be another aging queen . . . being jeered at by people like himself. Being laughed at. (Seroconverted in 1991 or 1992)

This man, who had just turned forty and was HIV-positive, also agreed:

Sometimes some of the despair and the grief . . . is that it's not just AIDS, it is growing older. I just turned forty last week, and I can't separate the two. Sometimes it's a very scary thought, there's some times when AIDS seems like an incredible relief. I feel that I am saved. I never have to worry about what I'm going to be when I grow up. I no longer have to deal with really frightening issues like how graciously will I grow old. What will I do when I'm no longer sexually . . . you know, current. And it's bizarre, but it's a strange tradeoff. Sometimes I think, well this solves a lot of things for me, doesn't it? (Asian)

One young man thought there were many young gay men who ascribed to the motto, "Live fast, die young." He said:

I know that there are young people who feel there is still total glamour in, "Live fast, die young." And especially when you're close to the

street, especially when you haven't got shit, especially when it's like, fuck all this because it's all fucked anyway. I think this is especially prevalent with people who are sort of in a modality of just sort of gypsyish and not really centered and not into sitting there and being cozy with their books and tea. There's total glamour in, "Why don't I just do what feels best for me?" (Less than Twenty-five Years of Age)

Young Men Feel Immortal, and Feel Like They Have Missed the Party

Several men also spoke of how young men felt they were immortal, as this man said:

There is a sense among people who are in their twenties or younger that they're immortal and they can't be infected. (Remained Safe)

Some men felt that among young men, there was a feeling of "being left out." One man explained:

I think the younger generation probably has unsafe sex out of anger because the old generation had the liberation to go out and have unsafe sex, and have promiscuity, and they didn't experience that. So in the beginning they usually start out with safe sex, and then they say, "Fuck it! I'm tired of this shit." (Latino)

Many Men Feel Like Sex is Back in Style

Several young men described the 1970's as the decade of the bathhouse, the 1980's as the decade of fear and boredom, and the 1990's as "the sixties's turned upside down," as this man said:

Looks like (sex) is coming back into style again. I think people are really tired of being shut out. And shutting themselves down. And I think it's a reawakening but with more of a . . . an understanding and with our eyes more open. (Less than Twenty-five Years of Age)

This man agreed that sex was back in style:

A friend of mine used to say, "Boys and sex are in again this year." Unfortunately a lot of them aren't as smart as they should be. It's going to be an acute year in terms of that . . . I've been out, there's definitely an energy out. (Latino)

Another man spoke of how men he met were more apt to want to have sex than they had been previously:

When I speak to people socially, too, I've seen that more. And I've seen more of the "Let's do something" coming back. For a while I think people were just totally terrified, and guilt-ridden. And I think it's just gone on for so long, that some people are saying, "Oh, fuck it." Or "I don't give a shit anymore." (HIV-Positive)

Being HIV-Positive is Part of the Gay Experience

Several men agreed with this man, who felt that some men wanted to become HIV-positive, because being HIV-positive was part of the gay experience:

It's like being part of the club . . . it's like that's what it is to be gay. You better be positive and in Shanti and Open Hand, and get your T-cells counted and . . . Call your friends and see what new medication they're taking today. And it's part of the club joining now. (I felt that way before I tested positive). And I read articles about it along that line. About being part of the identity of being gay. (Seroconverted in 1991 or 1992)

Several other men spoke of the grief that surrounded many men in terms of dealing with the sick and dying, and that in many cases it just seemed easier to become part of that group. One man said:

People might want to convert because the people that are going to be left, still negative and still alive, now and in years to come, are going to be so devastated by everyone else around them dying that are they going to have any life left? And I feel like a lot of it is like a whirlpool that I feel like I just got sucked into. It was like at first I was just at the periphery, then I knew more and more people, and it was inevitable that I was going to be sucked into it at one point or another, and finally I am. Just sucked into it. (Seroconverted in 1991 or 1992)

This man agreed, saying:

I think a lot of people are afraid to be the last one left or to have all of their friends get sick and die. People are seeing a lot of people die and don't want to be the only one left. People end up getting stressed, worried about it all the time and they can't deal with it. (Do Not Know Antibody Status)

Another man spoke of how a man in his twenties was dealing with these issues:

My boyfriend's roommate keeps a book of obituaries of all the people he's known who have died. And every time somebody dies who he knows, he cuts their obituary out and he puts it in his little diary . . . And he has talked a little bit about feeling left out. All these people have gone on without him. And he's left with the rain flooding out his basement and all this shit. And yet he continues to test negative. (Seroconverted in 1991 or 1992)

Men Are Tired of Restraining Themselves

Many men also spoke of how they were "tired," how practicing safe sex required a constant vigilance. These feelings were especially prevalent among those who had relapsed. As this man said:

I think part of it is just fatigue. It's been around for ten years, and people are tired of restraining themselves. And a sex club is very very decadent, very much a way to let it all hang out. And people are taking advantage of it. (Relapsed in Last Year)

Another participant agreed:

I just get tired. I get exhausted and feeling like I have to constantly be on guard and watch and think, and I can't ever relax. That I've got this proverbial guard. To me it's like the image of the security officer with the searchlight. I get tired of that after a while. And I know what I'm supposed to do. And everything says, "Yes, you've got to do that," but after a while I'm just getting tired of it. And I tell myself, "Well, you're supposed to," and I try to convince myself. (Relapsed in Last Year)

This man spoke of how he simply *missed* "the old days:"

I'm sorry, this is not easy to admit, but I miss being able to be a true, blue, slut. And not think about what I was doing. Even though there was still venereal disease going on, that if I wanted to do it with everybody, everywhere, any moment of the day or night, that I did not have to think about it, and I could go get a shot. And that was the end of it. And I want—you were talking about, you know, be honest, I'm being honest. I would like to say, "No, I'm Mr. Righteous here, and yes safe sex has been incorporated in my life and it's not a problem." Bullshit! It's a problem. I don't like having to think about condoms. I don't like having to think about it in the middle of passion, when he's

rubbing my asshole with his cock, and I've got to say, "Stop! Oh no! It's time to go get the condom now!" I mean, I don't want to deal with that. I do. But I don't want to. (Relapsed in Last Year)

Fear of Being HIV-Positive is Not as Great

Some men, like this man, felt that the fear of being HIV-positive was not as great as it had been previously:

I think that's the issue right there. The fear is not what it once was. People have gotten over the fear part, and now they're coping. Because they're coping, they're saying now it's okay, "because I can handle it" in some other fashion. (Relapsed in Last Year)

This man agreed, saying:

At first I was very scared. And I shied away from sex. I felt threatened by AIDS. And now I'm much more realistic about it. And you weigh this risk against others that you take. And I ride a motorcycle around, and it's not exactly safe. So you try to put it into context of what else you do in your life. (Relapsed in Last Year)

Rules Change Depending on Antibody Status

Many men had different "rules," depending on the antibody status of the person they were having sex with. For many HIV-positive men, that meant it was acceptable to have unprotected anal intercourse with another man who was also HIV-positive. This man explained:

Well, I have to say I have two different standards of safe sex, because I always have a discussion with someone about HIV status before I go to bed with them. So they know of my status and vice versa. And if they also are HIV-positive, then I can slack off a little bit. And there is one guy who I've been dating, who is negative, and we have strict safe sex . . . No blow jobs. Condoms if we're going to have intercourse. But basically, the safest sex you can have is passive sex (masturbation). And that's pretty much what it comes down to . . . It's like, so if they're HIV-positive—I don't mind giving a blow job or whatever. I'm not too concerned about that. (And I'll have anal sex) from time to time. (Relapsed in Last Year)

Another participant agreed:

I sort of hold the same rules as him. Like, with someone negative, I want to be, like three times as careful. But with someone positive, I

feel like, well, maybe I deserve a treat, and, you know . . . at least I didn't lop thirty years off their life. (Relapsed in Last Year)

One man told of a time when he did not reveal to a partner that he was HIV-positive, for fear that the partner would then want to engage in unprotected anal intercourse. He said:

I went home with someone a few months ago. And we were having a great time, and then he said, "Do you want to fuck?" I said, "Well, I don't feel like getting fucked tonight." "Oh, that's okay I'm a bottom." Well, I was really hot for him, so, okay. But where's the rubbers? "Oh, I don't have any." "In your entire apartment you don't have one?" And he begged me for like an hour, and I refused to do it. But I couldn't bring myself to tell him about my antibody status, because then he would have said, "Oh, I am, too, let's do it!" (Seroconverted in 1991 or 1992)

Anal Sex is "Macho" Sex

Several men said that anal sex is "macho" sex, and that some men look down on others who would not engage in the practice. One man told of a previous encounter:

He wanted to have anal sex and I didn't want to. And he just thought that it wasn't really having sex without doing that. And I didn't agree, but he thought it was really important. He just kind of insulted me and left. (Remained Safe)

This man agreed:

Because they feel less than a man. It's a macho thing. You know you ain't getting the real thing. They come up with all these excuses. (African-American)

Anal Sex is "Going all the Way"

This man thought that engaging in unprotected anal intercourse involved "total giving in." As he said:

It is sort of a complete giving of yourself to that person, where you're totally exposed. I think that's one issue that's never been really addressed by the gay community. And it's like a spiritual dimension, like Catholicism, if you don't have, like, risky sex. If you don't have that semen get in there, it's not even considered genuine. It's not considered integrated. And I think that we take it so lightly--"oh, well,

just use a condom. No big deal." But I think maybe it is a big deal in terms of that total giving of oneself to another person. That you're totally giving yourself to them. Exposed to them. And the condom...stops that. To a certain degree. (More than Thirty-five Years of Age)

This man agreed:

Maybe because I'm the creative type, it's the whole sense of living on the edge, and, you know, the danger that's involved. It's romantic. There's a certain romanticism attached to that. And it isn't there under other circumstances. Like when it's completely anonymous, or when it's the point where you've been with somebody for so long, there's not that kind of romanticism. Is that maybe the gay equivalent of "going all the way"? The final frontier? (More than Thirty-five Years of Age)

This man felt that much of the attraction of "gay" sex was the risk that was involved. As he said;

But I think part of the attraction of, like gay sex, is that it's risky. Sex at risk. I mean, it always has been. It's always been on the edge. And I think to associate condom use with risk, I mean with being on the edge. I think safe sex is sort of seen as banal sex, or something like boring sex, old-fashioned sex. (More than Thirty-five Years of Age)

Problems with Condoms

Many men equated using condoms with "being prepared" to have sex and felt that this took the spontaneity out of the practice, as this man said:

Also, you have to prepare for safe sex. So sex with me was always pretty spontaneous. And I always resented having to prepare. (HIV-Positive)

Some men also spoke of how they would begin having anal intercourse with a condom, but that after a while it was not easy to keep putting new condoms on. One man said:

I mean, I'll use a condom, and depending on how long I do it, there are times when I would have to stop myself and, you know, reapply another one . . . But it's just not natural anymore. (Asian)

Like this man, for many men it was simply that having sex with condoms did not feel as good:

A big reason a lot of men don't like to use condoms is because it doesn't feel the same. A lot of people don't like to wear them because they don't like the way it feels. (African-American)

Doubts About How HIV is Transmitted Leads to Unsafe Sex

In all of the groups, men spoke of knowing other men who had engaged in unprotected anal intercourse and who continued to test HIV-negative. Because of this, these men had some doubts about how the virus is transmitted, as this HIV-positive man said:

Two of the biggest whores and best bottoms that I know have tested consistently negative. And they go regularly. And I do not know why, because I have even slept with one of them. (Asian)

This HIV-negative man felt that he was at less risk of becoming infected because he was always a "top":

When I was with (my lover who died of AIDS), I was always on top. And I've always been a top consistently. And like I said, I had unprotected sex in the last year, but that was because I was a top and somebody was a bottom, and I didn't use a condom. And I know they say you can, but for some odd reason in the back of my mind I think actually that's okay. And I don't know whether it's naive or stupid to think that. (Asian)

Different Moods or Situations Can Lead to Unsafe Sex

This man spoke of how different moods or even a certain holiday could trigger things inside of him that made him want to engage in certain types of sex. He said:

Well, I know for myself there are certain moods that I'm in. Like for example one time I went to a club, a dance club, and ran into an ex-boyfriend, who generally bothers me, that really bothered me, and then I went walking right across the street, up the stairs, into a sex club, and fucked somebody. And it was like, I don't usually have any kind of intercourse—or I don't have anal intercourse, usually, in the sex clubs. And I was just pissed off and mad, and I fucked somebody. And it was because I was in that kind of a mood. I was in the mood to show men up . . . So that's what I did. Yeah, it was safe. I mean, I used a condom. But that's an emotional side. And there's lots of

different emotional things that you go through. That was a specific incident . . . There are certain needs that you go through. I mean, birthdays, certainly holidays. Sometimes you feel more needy. Sometimes I equate neediness with having more bottom-oriented sex. Sometimes I equate more confidence in having top-oriented sex. (Relapsed in Last Year)

Another man said that while he was on vacation he would engage in sexual activities that he otherwise would not engage in:

When I was negative, for nine months it was really easy. Maybe I wasn't getting that much sex, then, too. But it was easy enough. But then I had to go to Europe for a trip. And then, well, you're on a trip, you've got to spend more money, eat more food, go to the bath houses, be relatively careful . . . Yeah, or just the fact of being there. At that point the slipping up was oral sex and letting someone do what they want with my ass and their hand. But, you know, at home, you know, if someone asked me, I would have said, "No, you can't do that." (Relapsed in Last Year)

Several men talked about the "games" they would play while having sex, and how some of these "games" could lead to unsafe sex. This man's "game" was meant only to simulate unsafe sex, but he spoke of how "pretending" could get out of hand:

It's a little game I like to play, sometimes when I'm having sex, it's like to pretend like we're going to fuck without a condom, but not actually do it. But in other words, they don't enter me, nor do I enter them, but pretend. Well some people don't get that that's pretend. And when they do that it's like, you have to, stop them . . . I know if I'm pretending to be the top I don't do it. But if I'm pretending to be the bottom, sometimes they'll just try and shove it right in. And it's like, no, no, that's not what we were doing. So that's happened to me once, maybe twice. And I was like, "No, no." (Relapsed in Last Year)

This man's "game" was that as a bottom, he always relied on the "top" to supply the condom. He said:

Since I tend to be sexually more of a bottom, I've made it sort of a rule that the top is the one that has to have the condom. They're going to carry a condom, because they're going to be fucking me. And that kind of goes with this trend. For a long time, that rule held. They always had a condom. And I've noticed in the last couple years, that's not necessarily the case anymore. (Relapsed in Last Year)

This man had engaged in unprotected anal intercourse because he thought he was going to be in a relationship with the man:

We had both been tested, and we were both negative. And I thought the relationship was going to be more of a monogamous relationship. And I let (unprotected anal intercourse) happen. And then of course the relationship ended a few weeks ago. And I regretted it. Letting myself go to that extreme . . . I think it was kind of like denial, really, to tell you the truth. When you want to experience something so badly, you know, you want to really experience a very free, intimate, sexual relationship. I kind of closed my eyes to the reality. Just not wanting to think about AIDS and infection and whatever. (Relapsed in Last Year)

Some Men Think that Unsafe Sex May be More Likely to Occur in Sex Clubs

Some people felt that men who went to sex clubs or bathhouses did not care about what sexual activities they engaged in, as this man said:

I think that people who turn positive go, "Oh, I can always go to the bath house, or the sex club, because nobody cares there." You know, it's that sort of attitude. (Seroconverted in 1991 or 1992)

However, many men agreed with this man, who said he did not know if a lot of unsafe sex was happening in sex clubs. As he said:

I know there are more clubs opening up. And whether they're practicing safely in them, I don't know. I know of one club where people are practicing safely, but I don't know about the other ones. (HIV-Positive)

This HIV-positive man spoke of how he would not necessarily initiate safe sex in sex clubs and bathhouses:

When I go to the clubs or something, I think they might be negative, but they've taken the risk the minute they walked in the door, they've made their decision. So at this point it's more up to them. (Relapsed in Last Year)

Substance Abuse Can Lead to Unsafe Sex

In all of the groups, many men talked about how alcohol and substance abuse impaired their judgement, as this man said:

Try not to get drunk. It impairs your judgement. And kind of makes you desire the things that are kind of forbidden. (Less than Twenty-five Years of Age)

Another man agreed, saying:

I think a lot of it might have to do with drugs and alcohol too. When people get really drunk and really high they don't take care of themselves. You put yourself in different situations than if you were sober. I know for myself I do that and know of other people who do too. (Do Not Know Antibody Status)

Why Some People Are Having Safe Sex

Participants who had remained safe were asked why some men were able to never engage in unprotected anal intercourse. In all groups, men gave similar responses to these questions. As might be expected, however, the most detailed conversation on this topic occurred in the group of men who had remained safe. Like this man, some men felt it was a sense of responsibility:

Responsibility. Respect for yourself and the other person. I have a conscience. God, I couldn't sleep at night. I mean, God, if you thought you gave something to someone. (Remained Safe)

For other men, it was a sense of wanting to survive the epidemic:

Survival. Just wanting to be around. Wanting to be around. The fact that I've survived this period of time. I want to stick it out. (Remained Safe)

Some younger men had never had unprotected anal intercourse, as this man indicated:

AIDS has been there as long as I've been sexually active, so I never had a period when I had that freedom. So I've been conditioned to safe sex. So, I don't know, I just don't think of not doing it. (Remained Safe)

When asked to rate their top three sexual practices, not one man in the group of men who had remained safe placed anal intercourse on their list. This man felt that staying safe might depend on which sexual practices a man found most enjoyable:

It's a very personal opinion, of course, but the most intimate sexual act is not anal sex, but kissing. And it's what I was the most reluctant to get into when I came out. Even when I came out, I thought that two men kissing

was . . . inconceivable. Kissing was reserved for heterosexuals. And then I discovered it, and I liked it. (Remained Safe)

For some younger men, unprotected anal intercourse was not seen as very attractive. Like this man, some associated the practice with guilt:

Anal sex can come with feelings of guilt and bad feelings, and that's why it's not as high up on the list. (Remained Safe)

Still others saw the practice as "messy:"

I've only been having sex since safe sex has been around. But I did have a boyfriend once and we were monogamous, and we were negative, and one time he fucked me, and he was without a condom . . . the fucking part was pretty fun, but . . . when he ejaculated, I was like, "Oh, that was the most disgusting thing." Gross. (Relapsed in Last Year)

Choosing Between a Great Sex Life and Living to be 75 Years of Age

When asked to choose between living to be 75 years of age or having a great sex life, at least half of all men said they would prefer to have a great sex life. As this man said:

Well, first of all, there are a lot of old people out there who are suffering, I think. They're abandoned by their children. They end up in nursing homes. And 75 is pretty old. And you can't take care of yourself. You lose your mind. There's alzheimer's disease. And it's horrible. (26 to 35 Years of Age)

Some men, however, said they would prefer to live to be 75 years old. As this HIV-positive man said:

I don't know, looking back on it, I think in terms of probably not living more than another five, ten years at the most. While the nights at the Cauldron and the Catacombs and all those places were fun, I'm not sure that I don't regret having made those choices, not knowing then what we know now. That it would be nice to grow old together with my lover, dog, and cat. And I guess in some anticipatory grief, I miss some of that. Or anticipate missing that. (More than Thirty-five Years of Age)

Many men said they could live to be 75 years of age and still have a great sex life. As this man said:

Well, it was an easy choice for me, because the question assumes that--for me, the sex life that I'm having that is safe is extremely erotic. And romantic. I mean, I don't identify safe sex as being non-romantic and non-erotic. And so, it wasn't even a choice. It was like, I don't have to make that choice because I'm having good sex now at it is. (More than Thirty-five Years of Age)

How to Better Reach Men

Many men thought that condoms should be more readily available in San Francisco, as this man said:

I say let's make condoms more available. I know that they're very expensive. You go into the drug store, and you buy a box of condoms and bottle of lube, you're talking about \$20. (Relapsed in Last Year)

Another man agreed:

In New York I was really surprised, I went to a sex club there, and it was like they were fucking, and I thought, "This is really interesting." What was really different was there were condoms everywhere. Condoms and lube everywhere. And it was different than the clubs here. Like they would be out on a bench. And people were using them. I thought, "Wow, this is really great, people having sex in these clubs, and they're having safe sex." And they can fuck and the condoms are right there, and they don't have to go search for them. (Relapsed in Last Year)

Several men specifically mentioned the Rubbermen who used to go around to bars in San Francisco, and thought they had been a good idea. One man said:

I miss the Rubbermen. I miss them coming out in the bars. It was festive and it brought a good message. And they're not around anymore. They broke up about a year and a half ago. (Relapsed in Last Year)

Another man said he missed "the condom fairies:"

I think the best solution is just continue to have a ton of condoms out there so that they're extremely obvious. I noticed that I don't see the condom fairies around as much as I did before. (Latino)

Some men felt that men needed to be educated on the nonverbal clues they could give other men. This man said he always felt relieved when he went home with someone and condoms were readily displayed:

I remember going home with people, and what a great feeling I would get when I would go into their bedroom and see lubricant, and seeing a big fishbowl full of condoms next to the bed. Because we don't have to talk about it. He knows we're going to have safe sex. And it was a given.
(Latino)

Some men also thought that a more sex-positive approach might be effective, as this man said:

I have another approach. I'd like to see creative sexual solutions. Where instead of saying, "No, no, no, don't, don't, don't," you create environments that say, "Yes, do, but here's a safe way to do it. Here's condoms. Fuck here. We want you to fuck, we know you're going to fuck. Do it here, where you can do it safely." So that there's freedom there instead of trying to always stop it and say "Oh, you can't do that."
(Relapsed in Last Year)

Like this man, some men thought that commitment needed to be emphasized:

We said condoms and education. Maybe we really need to talk about commitment more, because I know with me that hits a nerve when people talk about commitment. (Relapsed in Last Year)

This man thought there needed to be messages encouraging men to talk to one another about safe sex:

I think there need to be more messages about talking. Like they have the messages about always use a condom. I think they should have a message, like, always **talk** to the person that you're about to sleep with. Because I can't really remember any flyers about talking to anybody. (Less than Twenty-five Years of Age)

Some men felt that more educational efforts needed to be focused on the city's gyms, as this man mentioned:

Maybe something in the gyms. Because I notice in the gyms is where there's a lot of sexual energy build-up. Something has to be offered in the gyms . . . something to divert them away from sex clubs and dance clubs and drugs. (Latino)

Messages That Have Been Seen

Men in all groups had seen the HIV/AIDS prevention campaigns produced by local San Francisco agencies. When asked what messages they had seen, men in all groups mentioned messages relating to safe sex, alcohol and substance abuse, and treatment.

Most men said that they thought HIV/AIDS prevention messages were believable and that they did not come from "the authorities." The one exception to this were young men, who, like this man, felt that they were not being spoken to by their peers:

My problem is that I think gay people are getting a lot of their messages from these really powerful straight people. And a lot of them are great people. Be it Madonna, be it all these other people who are straight. You know, and they're really saying something good, and they're really helping us, but I have yet to see someone who's gay that I look up to, and who's giving me my information. You know, there's a lot of people that are, but they're not as powerful. And I'm really looking to see, like, a gay power figure that I can, you know, see and identify with every day on TV, like I can with Madonna. (Less than Twenty-five Years of Age)

Some men felt that messages needed to be more "hard-hitting," as this man said:

I think a lot of the campaigns are a little bit too soft. I think that people need to be slapped around a little bit. (Remained Safe)

Another man agreed:

Well, I was going to add that after a while these messages, they get to be kind of gooey. They kind of lose their effect and impact. Because they're so gung-ho, so encouraging, so positive. I don't understand why . . . the AIDS agencies are trying to encourage people to be safe. They should use a tactic similar to what Operation Rescue does, and show what happens when you're unsafe. I mean, it sounds really drastic, but perhaps it might scare some young people . . . They need to be even more specific. They need to be even more blatant. And if it scares some people, then I say go for it. (Asian)

This man liked messages he had seen relating to substance abuse:

And you know a message that's going out now that I really like seeing, actually, is the thing with drugs. Because there's a lot of drugs coming back into the community, too. Speed, especially. And I think speed is, like, Satan's little drug. (Relapsed in Last Year)

In several groups, men mentioned the San Francisco AIDS Foundation's series of billboards stressing "family values" and "the moral majority." Most men who mentioned these ads liked them. As this man said:

Family values and safe sex. They were cute and they were sex-positive, but very much, you know, safe sex. And value each other. Have a value of your other family member by having safe sex. (Seroconverted in 1991 or 1992)

This man said the "moral majority" billboard made him happy. As he said:

I'm sure it pissed off the Christians, which really makes me happy. (26 to 35 Years of Age)

The Stop AIDS Project

The Stop AIDS Project was singled out by many men in most groups as an effective program. About two men per group had attended a Stop AIDS meeting at one time or another. However, several men did criticize the program. This man did not think it was a multi-cultural organization:

The Stop AIDS Project has this thing going on, but if it was really with it, and really multi-cultural and stuff, it would be intense. (Less than Twenty-five Years of Age)

Another man felt that the program spent too much time talking about anal intercourse and should also emphasize oral sex:

Well, they have their drawbacks, but for people who already want to have anal sex, that may be of some benefit to them. If that's not really high on your menu of sex acts, that's what they talk about a lot, they talk about condoms and getting fucked with a condom. They don't talk about oral sex, with or without a condom or other things. (Seroconverted in 1991 or 1992)

This man felt that the Stop AIDS Project's campaign promoting 100 percent commitment to safe sex was unrealistic. He said:

Sometimes I think some of the ads are a farce. Like that one that says 100 percent. They say the commitment thing and the 100 percent, but . . . 100 percent is not realistic. I think anyone who tries 100 percent, most people are going to fail. (Relapsed in Last Year)

This man, however, liked that campaign. As he said:

What I thought really worked the best was when they were talking about wearing safety pins at bars, to let other people know that you only practice safe sex. That's more close to home. More right in your face kind of advertisement. (26 to 35 Years of Age)

Be Here for the Cure

Everyone had seen one of the San Francisco AIDS Foundation's latest campaigns, "Be Here for the Cure." For the most part, men liked this campaign a great deal. Many men saw this campaign not only as an early treatment campaign, but as an education/prevention campaign as well, saying it spoke equally well to both HIV-negative and HIV-positive men, as this man indicated:

I think it's great. It means take care of yourself. Love yourself. (Seroconverted in 1991 or 1992)

Another man agreed, saying:

I think it's more rounded. It's not, okay, keep your dick in your pants and have safe sex, now it's love yourself. Take care of yourself. You know, because there are other people out there that love you. You know, be here for the cure. Instead of seeing these two guys holding a condom. I mean, you know, it has changed. It was so sexual before, and now it's more life-focused. (Seroconverted in 1991 or 1992)

Several men mentioned that the "Be Here for the Cure" campaign reminded them of the last scene in "Longtime Companion." One man said:

The scene at the end of "Longtime Companion," where they're on the beach, that's a very very strong feeling, and that's what I feel when I see this ad. (Remained Safe)

Some people—especially those who had been HIV-positive for quite some time—seemed to be offended by this campaign, as this man said:

I've had people . . . see someone wearing the button or sticker and get really offended by it saying, they felt they were being excluded because they knew they were not going to be here for the cure. And the whole campaign was kind of rubbing it in their faces that they weren't going to be here. (Asian)

Another man agreed:

I tested positive five years ago and so I was not carrying around any illusions of being here for the "cure" but I don't like people, especially at that level, to bother me about stuff like that, it's not making me more secure, it's not making me seek treatment for things that can be treated now. (African-American)

Frustration with Messages Telling Men to Seek Treatment

Some men say they were also offended when they saw messages that told them to seek treatment. One participant said:

I feel disgusted (when I see those messages). Because we don't live in Canada or Great Britain where they have universal treatment. And if you try and get it and you do still have insurance, someone will find out and you'll lose your job. (Seroconverted in 1991 or 1992)

This man told of his frustration when he called the telephone number on some of the advertisements he had seen:

At first I thought it was a positive thing, I thought, okay this is great. I don't have insurance. And so I'm trying to go through all the calling the numbers, call "Be here for the cure," call all these different numbers. Okay, where do I go for a T-cell count? So I'm going down there to the health center number one, and I'm saying, "I don't have any money and I don't have a job, and my doctor tells me to come and get a T-cell count." And they say, "Well, why don't you go to your doctor for a T-cell count?" "Because it's \$110." And they said, "Well, you can't come here for your lab work." And so they were telling me not to go to my doctor, but I had to go there and do whatever they told me. And my doctor says, "Don't worry, you're going to be fine. Take care of yourself. It'll be years before you need anything." I go in there and they tell me, "You should go on AZT." So I'm going from my doctor, who tells me I'm fine, to those who are giving me a bunch of shit about going to my doctor. And then they do the T-cells and everything, and then they're saying, "Well, maybe you should go on AZT." (Seroconverted in 1991 or 1992)

This man felt that messages telling men how to "get through the system" were urgently needed:

(We need to tell people) how to get through the god damn system! I know how to get through the god damn system. I know how to fuck them over good. To keep my health insurance through my employer so

no one knows I'm positive, but use my taxpayer money and all my negative friends in San Francisco, and use the Federal Drug system and San Francisco General. I mean, we should have better access to care. (Seroconverted in 1991 or 1992)

Perceived Problems Encountered at City Agencies Dealing with AIDS

Some Latino men described the "white wall" at city agencies and clinics and felt that more attention needed to be paid to making men of color comfortable using these services. One man said:

(Men of color need to know) that you probably shouldn't be scared to get services. Because a lot of Latino people don't like to go to a white hospital. They're like, they don't want anything to do with white people. I think that scares a lot of them. (Latino)

African-American men agreed with this man who said that more attention needed to be paid to providing services to men of color:

The information is out there for everybody. This is just another rock for Black people to jump over. We've been dealing with problems for a long time, but we just handle it and go on . . . when one of us walks into an agency, you know, they don't get the best that the agency has to offer. (African-American)

Another African-American felt that the services were available, but that men of color did not take advantage of them:

I feel that we blacks don't get what we could because we don't get up and take advantage of it. (African-American)

And this man agreed, saying:

I agree with him. It's true. A lot of blacks, number one, they don't take advantage of what they have. The opportunities are there just like they are for Whites, but they don't take advantage of them. It's easier to sit back and complain about what I don't have, look at what the white man has, we don't have this or we don't have that. To me personally I don't buy into that for the simple fact that I attend the same schools as whites, half my family is white, so it doesn't make a difference to me. If you look at life through color you will always have problems. (African-American)

This man wondered why the church was not more outspoken on these issues:

I really feel that when it comes to the AIDS epidemic I want to know why I don't see any leadership from any of the churches. You know, in Oakland, whenever I've taken the time to speak to different churches, I've never heard back from them. (African-American)

For the most part, however, Asian men did not feel the "white wall," as this man said:

I think it depends on what agency you go to. I think if you start with the right one, like the San Francisco AIDS Foundation, they're very good with referrals and stuff like that. And I think it depends on what you're looking for. (Asian)

Vaccine Trials

In all groups, a few minutes was spent talking about participating in possible vaccine trials. Several men indicated they might be willing to participate in such a trial, "for the good of the community." Many men, however, had serious questions about the safety of such a trial, and questioned whether they would be willing to participate in such a trial. As this man said:

I went to NIH in Washington to be a part of a vaccine study, and the main concern is the way they put the information out is that they don't know exactly how it will affect you physically. And even though they can assure you to a certain point, there's still that percent that they have to give a disclaimer that they don't know exactly what's going to happen. (26 to 35 Years of Age)

Some men questioned how medical authorities would know if the vaccine was effective. As this man said:

My question is, you get this test, then they're going to tell you go have free sex all you want, and find out if it works? I mean, how are you going to test it? Well, that's my second point. I mean, how do you know it's really working? (HIV-Negative)

Some men questioned how participating in such a trial might effect their ability to buy insurance, and wanted to receive free health care for life in exchange for taking part in the trial.