

Gay Men Lament the Problem of Unsafe Sex in *Poz*

A revealing article in the gay magazine *Poz* featured a first-person, real-life account of a gay couple, one of whom admits that he knowingly infected his live-in lover. The story, "Protect Me From What I Want," was the feature article of the magazine's November 1999 issue.

The couple—a man named Hush, and his HIV-positive partner Stephen—offer some provocative insights into the problem of unsafe sex.

Hush candidly admits that he was erotically obsessed with Stephen, who came into the relationship HIV-positive. Stephen, however, soon lost sexual interest in Hush. With that, a crisis ensued.

"My identity increasingly centered on Stephen's approval and happiness," writes Hush. "I was deeply in love. I was, more plainly, obsessed."

When Stephen was especially aloof, Hush would try to provoke a fight, with the goal of channeling his partner's anger into sex through an S&M enactment. That worked only for awhile.

Sometimes he was so desperate for attention that he would, Hush admits, shamelessly "cry or beg" for sex. Finally, he discovered that there was one way he could renew his HIV-positive partner's erotic interest—by offering himself as Stephen's passive partner for unprotected anal sex.

Suddenly their relationship took on a new spark of excitement.

Of course, the inevitable soon happened. Hush, too, became HIV-positive like Stephen. Yet Hush admits that in a strange way, the sickness felt right. "In some dark way," he said, "that I should be a part of the great, tragic story."

And yet the story did not end there: Hush's newly HIV-positive status caused Stephen to lose romantic interest in his partner. Without the sexual rush which had been generated by the danger of unsafe sex, Stephen was no longer physically attracted to his partner. With Hush infected like he was, the excitement was over.

The two drifted into a platonic relationship. Meanwhile, the newly infected Hush began to frequent sex clubs. He reported a "new sexual confidence...I opened the relationship wide...health risks such as STD's seem minor, compared to the *fait accompli* of infection."

In the *Poz* interview which was written two years later, Stephen admitted that he now has little remaining feeling for the man to whom he gave a fatal infection. He reports that trying to keep their relationship going is a "daily struggle."

He says he is an expert in AIDS prevention, so he does not understand why he chose to risk infecting his lover. "I don't mean to deny responsibility," he says. "I know what I did was wrong."

Yet he seems to believe that some better form of education might have prevented him from infecting his lover.

"I may have read 100 brochures on the mechanics of safe sex, but I saw not a single guide exploring the emotional complexities that lead to risk in relationships," Stephen said. "I sense that many couples are trapped in a dynamic similar to Hush's and mine."

"In a way," he explains, "I feel fatalistic about Hush's sero-conversion."

In spite of the enormity of what he did, Stephen admits that he still feels a thrill at the thought of unsafe sex.

"After all that's happened," he said, "unsafe sex remains an attraction for me, and it is a regular struggle to use condoms with negative guys."

How could the couple talk to *Poz* about what happened with such frankness and equanimity?

In his book *Psychological Seduction*, William Kilpatrick spoke of the psychological society's "curious modern combination of 'hedonism and earnestness.'" Frankness (through an earnest discussion of one's own morally reprehensible acts) is assumed to be evidence of having taken responsibility. The result of this flawed approach, Kilpatrick notes, is a "debauch of tolerance."

NARTH's Joseph Nicolosi agreed. "Honesty about what happened represents a first step forward," he said. "But one must also commit oneself to understanding the motivations behind such behaviors."

"That deeper level of understanding—along with a willingness to act on that understanding—that's what's missing in this story."