
Social Work Study Examines Psychosocial Factors And Drug Use In Barebacking

"Condomless sex: gay men, barebacking, and harm reduction," by psychotherapist Michael Shernoff, MSW, was published in *Social Work*, April 1, 2006.

Shernoff's report surveys the current research on barebacking, including discussions of crystal meth use and various psychosocial factors that contribute to individuals engaging in risk taking behaviors.

Shernoff also notes that gays who practice safer sex for years are experiencing safe sex fatigue or burnout as a reason to return to unsafe practices such as barebacking.

High-risk behaviors have been linked to the advent of HIV antiretroviral therapy and provide gays with a misplaced sense of complacency. "Many believe that contracting HIV is not a big deal anymore -- certainly not a risk to life," said Shernoff.

In addition, party drugs have spawned an increase in barebacking. These include ecstasy, GHB, ketamine, and crystal meth. Research has shown that the use of crystal is clearly related to barebacking among gay and bisexual men in sexually charged venues such as circuit parties, which can last several days.

The Internet has also contributed to an increase in barebacking, according to Shernoff, as gay males can easily find others who are willing to bareback.

Barebacking can be used as a way of meeting interpersonal and interpsychic needs. According to Shernoff, "It is all too easy to adopt

a reductionistic approach and pathologize sexual risk takers as self-destructive, suicidal, damaged individuals or to believe that for some gay men danger is a permanent fetish, (Savage, 1999, p. 62). ... It is the task of clinical social workers to help an individual articulate the particular meanings of his high-risk behaviors."

Shernoff urges counselors to deal with this issue in a non-judgmental manner and to urge harm reduction behaviors for those who continue to bareback. One harm reduction method is to sign a mutual "negotiated safety agreement" on what each man expects during barebacking.

Writing for the Gay Health web site, Shernoff describes some of the other harm reduction practices, which include "serosorting," which means having unprotected anal intercourse with a man who has the same HIV status; "strategic positioning": where the infected male adopts the receptive bottom role during unprotected sex; "assessing the viral load": using information that they or a partner have undetectable viral loads to make decisions about whether or not to bareback; "substitution": using oral sex as a substitute for anal sex. ●

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therapist's office) where the shut down feelings and split off aspects of self can be expressed and explored. Integration of contradictory feelings (like love and hate, anger and guilt) creates a greater sense of inner stability and clarifies relationships of the past and the present. Open exploration of split off aspects of self (e.g., assertiveness or sexual desires) reduces the shame that has accumulated around these and allows them also to be integrated into the self as well.

This entire process requires facing fear in a profound and new way. Men must let down their defenses in order to re-enter internal conflicts that they deemed intolerable years ago. And they must venture into their bodies where illogical, uncomfortable, and unpredictable emotions exist. The process also requires looking for self-created double binds (transferred from relationships of the past into relationships in the present).

As the therapeutic process proceeds, men naturally begin to carry their newfound assertiveness, clarity, and wholeness into the real world of relationships. They allow others to see their feelings in the here-and-now. They become able to reveal themselves to others and stay in relationship rather than defensively detaching. And they find themselves in fewer double binds.

It is important to understand that Authenticity is both the catalyst and the linchpin of change. Without it there is not going to be any real change. It must be the primary focus from the very beginning of the change process.

Need Fulfillment

First, let me define the word "need." I define "need" as that which is required in order to maintain joy. I consider joy to be the central purpose of human existence. By joy, I mean the experience of satisfaction, well being, and completion; the sense that life is good, that it has purpose and meaning. I am speaking of joy in its mature, bigger-than-self form—not mere excitement, stimulation, or even bliss, although each of these may be part of joy. But joy encompasses much more than those, including pain, disappointment, and grief.

A reverse description of "need" may add context: It is a need if not having it causes deterioration of the personality, for example depression, defenses, intense yearnings, loneliness, alienation, shutting down of feelings, or loss of interest or creativity. These are the opposite of joy and thus indicate unmet needs. Absent from this list of negative experiences indicating unmet needs are the core emotions of anger, sadness, and fear. Though many may view those feelings as running counter to joy and need fulfillment, experiencing them when warranted is actually a need in itself and part of the process of maintaining joy.

Need Fulfillment depends on two masculine drives: to preside and to provide. Presiding implies self-governance—creating order and balance in your life, which must be maintained if needs are to be adequately met. Providing implies the actual work done to meet a need, whether that is bringing home the paycheck or spending time bonding with a male friend.

What Are The Problems?

The problems described earlier that block men with SSA from experiencing Authenticity are the also the root problems that block Need Fulfillment. Meeting needs requires first knowing self. Of particular importance is the shutting down of feelings, splitting of self, and disconnection from the body caused by childhood double binds.

Men with SSA often do well at meeting some of their needs, but do poorly meeting others. Typically, shame or an emotional conflict surrounds the needs they do not meet. For example, meeting the need to feel at ease in the body—to feel confident and secure in your own skin—might require exercise and dieting. But intense body shame can make it very difficult to even acknowledge the body's needs, much less care for the body or expose it by going to the gym for a workout. Or, meeting the need to individuate from mother might require creating boundaries in the relationship. But conflicting feelings of love, anger, and guilt can undermine the setting of boundaries with her.

Childhoods characterized by double binds can also diminish a man's ability to meet his needs by engendering a passive personality. Essentially a learned helplessness, passivity results from life situations that left the boy with no power in his own life—he was damned if he did and damned if he didn't. To make matters worse, he likely created a false self to interface with his hostile or unpredictable double-binding world. The purpose of the false self is to perceive the needs or wants of other people and to satisfy them. Awareness of self—along with the needs of the self—is lost.

The further in life these men go without knowledge of their needs, the further off track they can become. In some cases, a fundamental incompatibility develops between their lifestyle and the meeting of their authentic needs. Getting back on track can then require substantial effort and sacrifice.

Grief is what naturally happens when we are thwarted in meeting our needs. If grief is too painful or pervasive, grief might be defended against through various inaccurate methods, including masturbation, pornography, and homosexual fantasies or behavior.

How Is The Principle Of Need Fulfillment Lived?

Authenticity opens the way for Need Fulfillment by increasing awareness of both cognitive and physiological aspects of emotion. This means that a man can feel his feelings and understand what they mean. He is thus capable of understanding his emotions when they tell him what his needs are and when they tell him that his needs are either met or unmet.

When men first begin the change process, they often don't understand their needs. One way to help them find out what their unmet needs are is to follow their grieving emotions (i.e., anger and sadness) to their source. This process is used in therapy to resolve feelings from painful relationships. But it can also point out needs that were left unmet in those relationships as well as

needs that are being left unmet in the present. This process also makes viscerally clear to the man the painful consequences of not meeting his needs. Feeling these consequences can be extremely motivating.

But psychotherapeutic work alone may not be sufficient to help a man understand and meet his needs. Some men benefit from personality profiles, interest inventories, and aptitude tests to broaden their self-awareness, which can shed light on their individual needs profile. Also, accessing their own memory to review interests and life experiences can help shed additional light on their needs.

It may be helpful for men to consider various categories and types of needs. This can help them become aware of areas they might not have considered previously. While each person's specific needs are unique, most men working to change SSA seem to have needs in each of the following areas:

- Relational:** love, affiliation, community, affection, trust, understanding, and intimacy from people in general
- Male friendship:** attention, affection, and approval from men specifically
- Physical:** touch, pleasure, rest, work, exercise, nourishment, and grooming.
- Spiritual:** connection to God, the universe, or something bigger than self; inspiration,
- Work/Vocation:** to produce, feel effective and useful; to enjoy daily activities; to have variety.
- Empowerment:** safety, freedom, self-direction, autonomy, and opportunity
- Rest:** relaxation, sleep, diversion, and entertainment
- Self-expression:** the opportunity to articulate to myself and the world who I am.

As difficult as the foregoing processes of learning about needs may sound, the more difficult work of Need Fulfillment is the daily devotion of time, energy, and resources that is required in order to actually meet the needs. For some men, this can require substantial adjustments in their lifestyle as they begin committing their time and money to meeting their needs. This often requires a high level of commitment the people close to the man as well, especially if he is married and has a family.

Surrender

Put most simply, Surrender is letting change happen. Surrender is releasing from your life everything that inhibits growth and receiving into your life those things that foster it. As the previous sentence suggests, Surrender is bi-directional—it involves both letting go (releasing) and letting in (receiving).

Imagine a fortress that has been defending against an invading force for some time. The occupants of the fort are out of provisions and ammunition. They are beginning to starve and die. They are ready to surrender. Doing so requires that they first put down their weapons. This represents the "letting go" aspect of surrender. Once they have relinquished their arms, they must accept the new command of the opposing force. This represents

the "letting in" aspect of surrender. When the surrendering occupant of the fortress is a man with SSA, he soon discovers that the "opposing force" is benevolent and brings replenishment and healing.

Yielding To Change

Men with SSA tend to have a difficult time letting change happen. This is not a trait unique to them—many if not most people experience at least a little discomfort with change and many will avoid it if at all possible. Anyone who responds to change in this way foils his own growth and development—his own transcendence to something greater. Men with SSA tend to have problems with surrendering cognitively, emotionally, behaviorally, and spiritually. The problems in each of these areas results from unmet needs and unresolved painful feelings.

Cognitively, many men with SSA develop beliefs about themselves and the world, and about their places in the world, that are inaccurate and self-defeating. Most significantly, they have the belief that they are homosexual or "gay." Their perspectives are often full of distortions (inaccurate negative beliefs) and illusions (inaccurate positive beliefs) that prevent them from seeing things as they truly are. Relationship interactions are often misinterpreted. Personal traits (of self and others) are often misperceived. And future possibilities are frequently misunderstood. Additionally, some men with SSA have obsessive or ruminative thought processes that they cannot let go of. Whether or not these are directly linked to homosexuality, they tend slow the change process down. And they often lead to compulsive behaviors, (to be discussed below) further slowing the process of growth.

Emotionally, men with SSA tend to be rigid and narrow in their emotional and relational patterns. They have difficulty shifting from one emotion to another. They may get stuck in anger and be unable to shift from anger into forgiveness or sadness. Or, they may get stuck in depression and be unable to descend below the depression into the anger or grief that lies beneath it. Or they may lock themselves into a defensive posture that prevents them from feeling certain or all feelings. Anxiety, numbing out, superficiality and the subterfuge of the false self are all common defenses.

Behaviorally, SSA men tend toward addictions and compulsions. Most commonly, men with SSA are involved in sexual addictions, which may include fantasies, pornography, masturbation, and sex with another person whether live or by electronic means. These behaviors are repeated again and again for the pleasure or relief from pain that they bring. In homosexual relationships, engaging in very specific sexual patterns with specific types of men is often the rule.

Compulsions grow out of obsessive thought patterns and tend to be an attempt to "get it right." Although only a percentage of SSA men also have full-blown obsessive-compulsive disorder, many SSA men experience obsessions (discussed above) and show tendencies toward compulsive behavior. Repetition compulsions are common, and some would argue ubiquitous, among homosexual men. In a repetition compulsion, the man sets up a situation that repeats a painful dynamic from childhood in an attempt to "get it

right.” But the situation merely creates more painful—though familiar—feelings and ends up working as more of a punishment and distraction from moving on with life. He never really allows himself to “get it right.”

Gender-atypical behavior, although seemingly less serious than addictions and compulsions, can nonetheless slow a man’s change process. This is particularly true when the behavior reinforces to the man, or to those around him, that he is unmasculine, effeminate, or gay. Another behavioral problem worthy of mention might be termed “distractive lifestyle.” This refers to a way of living that keeps a man so busy doing unimportant things that he has no time to fall into his underlying pain or grief, or to pursue healing and change. Frequent partying, overworking, and excessive television watching are signs of a “distractive lifestyle.”

Spiritually, the problems tend to involve difficulty trusting something bigger than self and fears about being controlled and being out of control. The man’s deep shame often results in a narcissistic reaction of putting his own ego at the center of his universe. He may be wary of organizations, religion, authority, and power in any form. He may also believe that God has let him down and develop deep resentment toward the Supreme Being. From this position, the man is not open to mentoring, guidance, or inspiration. And he cannot transcend himself for fear of losing control of himself.

How Is The Principle Of Surrender Lived?

Cognitively, new mental constructs about self and the world must be acquired; illusions (inaccurate positive beliefs) and distortions (inaccurate negative beliefs) have to be exposed and relinquished. Perhaps the most significant belief about self that must be given away is the man’s belief that he is homosexual or “gay.” I believe that homosexuality cannot be changed without a conscious choice to do so. Often, the most significant belief about others that must be released is the stereotyped perspective of heterosexual men. Deep relationships with other men can help greatly in these processes, especially once trust begins to develop. Trust itself is a surrender of defensiveness and it opens the man to seeing other views of life that will challenge and correct his own. Sometimes, cognitive therapeutic processes must be employed to stop or reduce the obsessive or ruminative thought processes. These generally include an aspect of releasing or relinquishing (letting go) the obsessive thought.

Emotionally, the principle of Surrender begins with letting go of defenses and fully receiving and feeling your emotions. Emotions bring physical sensations and impulses in the body (e.g., anger might bring a pounding heart and an impulse to hit) and understanding to the mind (e.g., anger might bring recognition of the extent of abuse). Men must learn to release the physical sensations and impulses (often called a “charge”) in ways that don’t hurt themselves or others. And they must integrate the new

understanding, which creates growth and expansion of emotional capacities. Men in the change process must also surrender emotionally in relationships with trustworthy people by releasing information about themselves, exposing their feelings, and receiving love and affirmation.

Surrendering unhealthy behaviors depends on surrender in the other three areas since addictions and compulsions tend to be based on cognitive, emotional, and spiritual issues. For example, sexual addictions are often held in place by a deep sense of alienation or self-hatred while repetition compulsions are often based in unresolved traumatic parent-child interactions. Working through and surrendering these underlying issues can have a dramatic impact on the addiction or compulsion. Even so, additional behaviorally based or 12 Step work is often required to fully overcome the addiction or compulsion.

Similarly, gender-atypical behavior is essentially a reflection of underlying issues involving the man’s self-perception. Emotional and cognitive surrender (as described above) is the pathway to deep changes in self-perception. At the same time, consciously surrendering non-masculine behaviors and adopting gender-typical behaviors can be quite helpful in the overall process. Finally, surrendering a “distractive lifestyle” necessitates emotional surrender but also usually requires a purely behavioral intervention to help the man change his pattern.

Spiritual surrender may be done as one powerful act of faith—willingly letting go the control of your life, trusting that something bigger than you will benevolently step in. Some men can do this. Other men can only spiritually surrender a bit at a time as they gradually feel greater trust through successful experiences with powers greater than their own, whether that power is seen as the natural change process or as God. For many religious men, the love shared between them and God creates a willingness and desire to surrender. Whether done at once or through many small decisions, spiritual surrender requires a recognition that you are a smaller force in the universe and that there is some force greater than yourself that wants your wellbeing. Spiritual surrender also involves seeking transcendence. By this I mean, seeking to rise above where you have been, looking within yourself for more mature responses, and going to sources higher than yourself for guidance and inspiration.

Conclusion

The Four Principles of Change are useful because they are easily understood and implemented by men in the change process. They also provide a paradigm for therapists that can be applied in very specific ways to a full range of issues facing all men in the process. To me, “change” means that growth toward mature masculinity and heterosexuality is resumed and completed. Growth needs optimal circumstances to proceed. My hope in splitting out the whole growth process into the four Principles of Growth is to empower us to create whole growth processes and optimal circumstances for change. ●