

STRAIGHT MEN, STRAIGHT TALK

HIV/AIDS and the Young Black Man

***AIDS IS THE LEADING CAUSE OF DEATH AMONG BLACK MEN
BETWEEN THE AGES OF 25 AND 44***

***11% of black men infected with HIV/AIDS said they were infected
heterosexually***

If men are dying from AIDS while they're in their 20's, 30's, and 40's, this means that they're getting infected at even younger ages! The statistics show us that there's a good chance that there is a man in your life right now – a cousin, best friend, classmate...yourself – who has HIV.

The HIV/AIDS problem has hit home, and it's hitting hard: Blacks make up 49% of all the new AIDS cases reported amongst adults. That's almost *half!*

The causes - like the lives lost - are many and varied: unsafe sexual practices, drug use, mis-information, mis-education, and above all, a lack of communication.

It's about time for us to start talking about this epidemic in our community. It's important for young Black men to hear other Black men talk about sex in a life-affirming way.

Below are the collected responses of heterosexual Black men from different walks of life - doctors, lawyers, actors, artists, musicians - who thought it was important to share with you their thoughts and experiences about sex, sexuality, and AIDS.

We hope that this section of testimonials will encourage you to reflect on the importance of making thoughtful decisions regarding your sexual behavior. Indeed, we hope that these stories encourage you to use protection each and every time you have sex.

This is Straight Men, Straight Talk.

SEX

"I started having sex at 12. I know that's young, but that's how it was for me back then. I was a fast boy, always running around the neighborhood. They say 'idle time is the devil's workshop'; well, in my idle time I lost my virginity to some high school girl that lived just down the street from where I lived. It's sad, but I don't remember that much about her, except that she was much older than me and that I saw sex with her as some sort of conquest on my part." ***NASA Flight Engineer, age 32***

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"I was a late bloomer. I didn't have my first sexual experience - actual intercourse - until the age of 19. Of course I'd messed around with girls way before then...kissing, touching and all those things. But it wasn't until my first year of college that I had sex. I used the age old trick: I was supposed to be studying; she came over; one thing lead to another, and BAM! - we had sex."

Corporate Finance Specialist, age 43

"I wasn't raised in the church, I was raised by the church. You have to understand: I was in church, ALL THE TIME, and so pre-marital sex was a no, no. But I did it anyway...but not until I was 22. While all my boys were bragging about the girls that they had sex with, I was making shit up. We all lied, I suppose; I just lied up until a much older age. I don't remember the girl; I do remember it was at a party and that I'd never met her before that night. Now that I think about it, I probably had sex because I was so drunk." ***IT***

Specialist, age 39

AND MORE SEX

"My dad was the first person to give me the 'bird and the bees' talk. I guess he thought I was having sex - I wasn't; not yet - and one day after he and I had been working on the lawn, he just sort of pulled the topic out of thin air. Hearing my pa talk about 'dicks' and 'vaginas' was uncomfortable, but looking back I'm glad he did it. Because of him, sex didn't scare me as much as it would have when I started doing it." ***Attorney, age 39***

"My 9th grade basketball coach first talked to me about sex. It really was nothing special, he talked to the whole team. He did it because one of our team members had to leave school because he got some girl pregnant. I figured he didn't want that to happen to any of the rest of us so he basically told us to 'keep our pants on our hips unless we were pissing.'" ***Corporate Executive, age 42***

"I first talked about sex with an older cousin who was visiting us on his spring break. He was boasting about how many girls he was getting in college; I, of course, was looking at him in admiration as he told me story after story after story. I guess he saw how excited I was about girls and he told me to always wear a 'rubber', as we called condoms back then, and that I should never have sex with a girl unless I was absolutely certain that she wanted to. Sure, I listened to him." ***NASA Flight Engineer, age 32***

"I'm from the South; where talking about sex isn't done in privacy or behind closed doors. It's viewed as an open, natural thing that no one need be ashamed to talk about. That being the case, I talked to everybody around me about sex: my uncles, my dad, my friends, my friends' older brothers, my mom. I remember that conversations about sex with my mom were very 'cold,'

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very 'medical'. She was a nurse and saw everything in purely biological terms: 'This is a penis;' 'This is a vagina,' etc." **Art Director, age 34**

On HIV / AIDS

"I don't remember exactly when I first heard about AIDS. I just remember a period of time when everyone was talking about it. It was on the news, in the newspapers, everywhere. All I kept hearing is there was a new 'sex disease, a new sex disease that could kill you.' Well that was all I or anyone else had to hear before we were scared. But I guess people weren't that scared, and they continued to have sex. I know I did. At first, everyone thought only gay people could get it. Boy, were they wrong!" **Attorney, age 39**

"I really never gave HIV/AIDS a second thought until Magic came out and told the world he had it. That did it for me! I had revered Magic for so long and I thought that anything that could damage him must really be horrible. I also remember thinking, "damn, this thing is big!" During his press conference, it dawned on me that if he could get it, then so the hell could I; that truly was a scary thought. I didn't change my sexual frequency that much; I did, however, start using protection EVERY TIME." **IT Specialist, age 39**

"It was 1985, I think; and I was in the 9th grade. I don't remember who I'd heard it from, I just remember being scared as hell to ever have sex again without a condom. My family, friends, everyone was scared. Right then, protection against pregnancy wasn't the main reason I wore a condom anymore, AIDS was. Time has passed between then and now, but I still think of HIV/AIDS as scary shit! I'm not as afraid as I was when I first heard about it, simply because I'm not 'in the game' like I used to be. But the awareness that out there is a sexually transmitted disease that can kill you - that still scares me, and that fear keeps me safe." **Personal Trainer, age 30**

"I first heard about AIDS in about '81 or '82, and I remember feeling really confused about the whole issue, not really understanding what was going on. You have to remember that when the disease first emerged, there was a lot of misinformation floating around media circles, simply because people like pastors and politicians had taken it upon themselves to inform the public about a disease they obviously knew nothing about. They sort of made stuff up as they went along, and the public, not getting information from any other sources, just went along with what they were saying. The CDC and the American Medical Association were too busy conducting research to inform the public. It wasn't until about my freshman year in high school that the whole thing got cleared up for me by this girl who sat behind me in biology class. Her brother was a doctor and apparently he'd explained everything to her, then she did the same for me. It was only then I got scared." **Art Director, age 34.**

On Getting Tested

I got tested the day after I heard about AIDS. My doctor had to send my blood to a special lab that did AIDS testing but I didn't care. I was scared shitless! Now, I get tested every time I go to the doctors, which is about once or twice a year. You have to ask for the AIDS test. It's crazy, but they don't just give it to you." ***IT Specialist, age 39***

"Every time I go to the doctors to get blood work done, I request an AIDS test. I don't have insurance, so I have to pay extra to get it done. But I really don't care...especially not with something that could possibly kill me if I had it! And besides, my wife insists that I get one regularly, and she NEVER forgets, not ever." ***Corporate Finance Specialist, age 43***

"Get tested! It's plain stupid not to. I get tested every 6 months, religiously!" ***NASA Flight Engineer, age 32***

On Condoms and Such

"I remember when I was waiting on the results of my AIDS test, I went out and spent about \$10 on condoms. That was a lot for back then, but because of my fear of the disease, I didn't care about the cost. After that first time, I used to sneak into this little pharmacy a good distance from where I lived to buy condoms. There was a People's pharmacy closer to my house, but my mother and the pharmacist there were close friends. I didn't want him to see me buying condoms and then go and tell her. So I went further away." ***IT Specialist, age 39***

"Most of the girls I messed around with always had condoms in their purses when we had sex. But there were those rare few who never had condoms. A couple of times I foolishly had sex without a condom because it was more convenient at the time. A couple more times I had to buy some from this Korean grocery store down the street from my house. Of course I was embarrassed. But I did it so many times that I wore out the embarrassment. We all do eventually." ***Political Scientist, age 40***

"When condoms first came out they were nothing like the ones we have now: they were uncomfortable, thick, and WAY too small, especially for a Black man—if you get my drift. That's why most of the men I know didn't use them. We knew about the risk we were taking, but we considered it allowable. It wasn't until later on, when the condom was re-designed, that I started using condoms regularly. Now they even have them in different sizes!" ***Corporate Finance Specialist, age 43***

“I really didn’t start using condoms regularly until I was about 15. And I only started then because of a big scare that took place at that point in my life. At that time, I was having sex with this girl who gave me Chlamydia. I didn’t know what the hell it was and I was so scared! Anyway, I got it taken care of and from then on, started wearing condoms every time I had sex. When I was growing up, condoms were like cigarette lighters in my house...we always had them around. Today, when I buy condoms, embarrassment never seems to be an issue since everyone is using them...they’re supposed to be using them.” **Art Director, age 34**

On Being A Man

“My father always told me that being a man was three parts responsibility and one part courage. He told me it had nothing to do with getting more sex, nothing to do with money, nothing to do with anything but courage and responsibility. That made a lasting impression on me, because to this day I don’t associate sex with manhood. Sure, men have sex, but sex is not a prerequisite for manhood, if anything, it’s a privilege of it!” **Attorney, age 39**

“When I became a man, I immediately began to view women in a different light. When I was young and a boy, I saw them as simply sexual beings to quench my desires. When I became a man I realized that they were more than that, more precious than mere biology, more important than sex. Only when I learned to love did I realize the true value of a woman. And that value had nothing to do with sex. Like that girl [Alicia Keys] says in that song, ‘*A real man just can’t deny a woman’s worth*’.” **Corporate Finance Specialist, age 43**

“A man takes care of his responsibilities. He always stands up for what **he** believes in, regardless of what others around him may think. A man always freely expresses himself and his ideas and is never indirect in saying what he thinks. I think I became a man right after high school. I didn’t have a father, so my brother and I had to step up and help my mother out around the house. I learned independence and responsibility at an early age and I didn’t become a man until after I’d learned both those things.” **Personal Trainer, age 30**

“Sure, I can say that a man is responsible, a man is honest, and a man takes care of his own, but the truth is that it takes a lifetime to learn what **being** a man really means. I’m still learning. When I was younger, I always thought that when *I became a man* I would have sex ALL THE TIME! It surprised the hell out of me the first time a girl wanted to have sex and I didn’t. I guess that’s one of the lessons you learn on the journey to becoming a man:

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forbearance. Like an uncle of mine once told me: it's like being a croc, chillin' in the middle of a river, some things you snap at, some things you just have to let pass on by." **Art Director, age 34**

On Being A Black Man

"Society doesn't allow the Black man to just be *strong*; it insists that he must be stronger. Than what? Sometimes it feels like we have to be stronger than everything - just to breathe! Of course that's an exaggeration, but you get the point. Nothing is given to the Black man: he has to always make his own way, open his own doors; and much of the time society is pushing against the other side, trying to keep that door shut." **NASA Flight Engineer, age 32**

"The Black man must fight (truly fight!) for everything he ever hopes to achieve in this life. This is his greatest asset and his greatest problem." **Corporate Finance Specialist, age 43**

On Homosexuality

"I recently found out that one of my best friends from college is gay. I'll tell you what I told him: I really could care less about what goes on within the confines of anyone's bedroom but my own. It really does not matter who you choose to have sex with, as long as you (as a man) don't attempt to have sex with me (as another man). There was a time when I was so afraid of homosexuals. For a long time, I associated homosexuality with HIV/AIDS simply because when the disease first came out, it was initially characterized as a 'gay' disease. Of course, now I know that this is not the case, but the connection still remains in my head. I don't understand homosexuality...I love women too, too much. I do respect their right to be that way. It's like I tell my wife: you don't have to like my smoking, but you must respect my right to smoke!" **NASA Flight Engineer, age 32**

"Dealing with homosexuality boils down to how secure you are as a person. If you are secure in your ideals and your principles, then the ideals, principles and lifestyles of others really wouldn't bother you that much. I have many friends who are gay. Some of them are my closest friends. I would never want anyone to say that my heterosexuality is wrong; I wouldn't want to be chastised for choosing to love a woman, for choosing to love - PERIOD! Once I realized that, it just became a matter of doing unto others what I would want done to me. And besides, variety is the spice of life. My life would be less interesting without my gay friends." **Attorney, age 39**

"I have nothing against gays. I understand that they have to do their thing. But that does not mean that I have to like it. My position on homosexuality is this: I think it's wrong. But like I said, that's my opinion and I have nothing

against homosexuals. One of my Uncles is gay; I don't love him any less *because he's gay; I just don't agree with his gayness.*" **Personal Trainer, age 30**

On The Opposite Sex

"This might surprise you, then again maybe not. But most of the women I've been with weren't all that fond of using protection. I remember sometimes, I had to be the one to insist that we use protection during sex. I still love women though." **Political Scientist, age 40**

"God I love women! I love the beauty of them; their variety, their smells, their walks, the way they do their best to make you feel your best...I just love women!" **Attorney, age 39**

On Peer Pressure

"Everyone I knew felt some sort of pressure to have sex when they were younger. To be honest, I don't think it's necessarily a bad thing, of course in some cases it can be, but for the most part I think it's natural for a social group to expose its young to their procreative urges. There's nothing wrong with that, as long as that social group also teaches it's young to control those urges." **Political Scientist, age 40**

"Sure there was pressure to have sex when I was young. But when it happened I didn't mind. And besides, there was always humor involved, it was never anything serious." **Art Director, age 34**

Parting Words

This is a scary time, when AIDS is taking its deadly toll on Black men. Let's pretend that every young brother in America is listening...what is the one thing you would want them to hear?

"Live life to the fullest. And try not to kill yourself along the way." **Attorney, age 39**

"Look around you - look at AIDS, look at the mortality rates, look at the general state of the world. After you're done looking, see if it doesn't make sense to do whatever you can to protect yourself." **Personal Trainer, age 30**

"Life is too short and can be too much fun to allow something like HIV or AIDS to mess it up. Ultimately, the decision you have to make isn't really that hard:

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PROTECT YOURSELF ALWAYS! I hope that was clear enough.” **NASA Flight Engineer, age 32**

“I can only hope that some of you young men out there are my future replacements. Don’t let AIDS or HIV get in the way of allowing you to live long enough to enjoy life the way I’m enjoying it.” **Corporate Finance Specialist, age 43**

“Right now, you’re making decisions for someone you don’t know - and that ‘someone’ is you 10 years from now. Be certain that the decisions you make now are good ones.” **Art Director, age 34**

Testing, Testing 1-2-3

One of the best things you can do to protect yourself and your partner(s) from HIV/AIDS is to GET TESTED.

There are no words to tell you how important it is that you and your partner(s) get tested - REGULARLY! And by regularly we mean that you should **GET TESTED AT LEAST ONE TIME EVERY 6 MONTHS**, since six months is about how long it takes HIV/AIDS to show up in current testing methods.

Don’t give yourself any excuses. [Talk to the counselors](#) that are available at the many clinics around the country and they will be able to hook you up with the location(s) of the nearest testing facilities.

Oh, before we forget, there’s one more thing we should tell you about getting tested: **KNOW YOUR RIGHTS!** And, yes, you DO have rights when it comes to getting tested

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25 AND 44

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- **Glossary Items**

None

- **STOP The Silence Website Elements**

THE HOOK UP

See STOP The Silence, “The Hook UP”

KNOW YOUR TESTING RIGHTS.

See STOP The Silence, “Know Your Testing Rights”