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Winter 12-18-2020

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1530 words

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21 January 2021

The Gay men who play with their HIV Status.

Forty Years ago, being declared HIV positive was considered close to a death sentence. For most of the 80s the plague took over our community killing husbands, lovers, friends and family.

But since the 90's a group of individuals known as Bug Chasers, predominately gay men have been playing a game of cat and mouse actively wanting to be caught and infected with HIV.

“A bug chaser is part of a subcommunity,” said adult film star and producer Tim Tyler.

“They are somebody who intently seeks out HIV and proactively converts themselves.”

The idea and term of bug chasing was first introduced in the late '90s, when the term started to appear in medical and psychiatric journals. It has become a hot topic for many, a fairy tale to others, and incomprehensible for some -- particularly to those who have survived the disease.

Yet, nearly 1 million deaths later; sites such as Twitter, Nasty Kinky Pigs (NKP), Bareback Real Times (BBRTS) and The BareBack BrotherHood (BBBH), make it easy for those within the bug chasing community to stay in contact.

Those who consider themselves bug chasers and others who are HIV positive and seeking to “give the gift” of HIV to a negative person (gift givers), can talk, plan sex parties and host get togethers all by way of the internet.

Individuals with the desire to become HIV-positive or spread HIV all have separate reasons for wanting to do so.

“I used to think, why would someone be so foolish to put themselves in harm's way, and the only way I could make sense of it at the time was to think of a cutter, someone who wants to relieve pain or has low-self esteem,” said Joe Kort, famed psychotherapist, clinical social worker and board-certified sexologist.

However for adult film star Tim Tyler, who at one point was a bug chaser, his process like so many was personal.

Tyler's Journey: an Explanation.

Born and raised in upstate New York, Eric Hastings moved to New York City in his early 20s.

Growing up as a young gay during the time of the AIDS epidemic, Hastings remembers a time when there were no antivirals.

Testing positive meant certain death.

However, he came up with two reasons why he needed to become HIV-positive: he was tired of hearing safe sex is the best sex, and was also upset at the lack of government interference. The only thing gay men could do to combat HIV at that time was to wear a condom, be celibate and hope a partner was faithful.

It felt like he was losing control over his sexual well-being and identity, and he wanted to take it back.

“So, here I am in New York City, I’m at a friend’s sex club and nobody’s wearing a condom and there’s this thing called HIV,” said Hastings.

That was when he decided if he was truly to become autonomous, he needed to abandon who he was and become Tim Tyler, his new alias and alter ego. “I was HIV-negative, and I thought to myself, ‘this is just an inevitability.’” he said. “It was all very analogous to a snake charmer, and a snake charmer eventually gets bitten.”

“So, the philosopher in myself asked: ‘What happens if the snake charmer offers his hand to the snake? Is he equally impacted or less impacted?’ Tyler continued. “So, I thought ‘I need to volunteer myself to HIV.’”

Tyler did just that, becoming a bug chaser. In the five years he lived in the city, Tyler had hundreds of partners. He helped run underground sex clubs for friend and mentor Lou Maletta, founder of the Gay Cable Network.

Tyler got “action” whenever he could. He was an escort for two separate companies and would actively sero-sort, the process by which individuals choose partners based on their HIV status. He remembers actively looking for an outward sickly appearance on his sexual partners.

In 1999 after chasing for a few years, Tyler seroconverted. Seroconversion is the point in which HIV antibodies become present in the blood and deliver an HIV positive test result.

The next year, Tyler starred in his first adult film for a company whose videos depicted bareback sex, or anal sex without a condom. This was during a time when barebacking was seen as a taboo and considered high risk sexual behavior.

Today, Tyler is an active porn producer and runs his own adult video site that features HIV-positive performers and bug chasers. He is seen as one of the original bug chasers and he is very loud and proud of his HIV positive status. He even gets messages on Twitter from individuals thanking him, saying they, too, have started their own bug chasing journey.

Not a “gift giver” himself, Tyler hosts sex parties every so often where bug chasers can attend in hopes of becoming HIV-positive and gift givers can attend to help with those goals.

The Case for the Modern-Day Bug Chaser

Information on bug chasing used to be scarce, since those who practice it remain a sub-group within the larger LGBTQIA+ community.

In 35 years as a practicing psychotherapist, Kort has worked with many professionals -- most recently, Tiffany Polzin, Psy.D.

In her dissertation, “Why do some gay men bug chase an HIV-positive serostatus?” She found four reasons why men might want to seroconvert.

Dr. Polzin found that for some gay men, hearing that their preferred type of sex is dangerous and should be approached with caution, may lead to anger. Some gay men believe that their rights have been violated by being told to have sex a certain way. In allowing themselves to be sexual in any way possible, it becomes a defiant political statement that frees them from oppression, she said.

Another reason for a bug chaser wanting HIV may be loneliness and group solidarity, she found. If all the members of a person’s inner circle are positive, he may want to contract HIV so he does not feel left out.

Fear and relief also play a role, the idea of becoming HIV-positive sooner rather than later offers relief from the worry of an eventual HIV-positive test.

Lastly, Dr. Polzin found that eroticism plays a role. Many gay men enjoy the fantasy of the high risk behavior: almost getting HIV turns them on. In engaging in sexual activity with another gay man who is HIV-positive, it offers an erotic thrill.

This can be seen on Twitter, NKP, and BBRTS, where bug chasers and gift givers can post their desires, feelings and sexual escapades. At any given time in the Manhattan area close to 300 men could be online many posting advertisements on sites that often read: “Neg looking for Poz Play,” or “Looking to party and take charged up loads.” “Looking for Toxic men to charge a Neg hole.”

Advertisements often ask that men just come to a desired location to have a fling and then leave, most encounters are always bareback to ensure that the men might become HIV-positive.

The case against

And then there are those within and outside of the gay community who find bug chasing to be careless. In 2018, almost 16,000 people died in the U.S. alone from an HIV infection.

Some like artist and occasional porn star Hudson Nash, who is HIV positive, find it very annoying.

“Men who are on sites like Twitter and BBRTS hide behind a mask, they are scared to come out and say I like this type of sex,” said Nash who has had the virus since the age of 19 and is now in his 30s.

Nash remembers a time when there was such a stigma around gay men who were HIV positive, they were seen as dirty. He says since the development of PREP and the internet, individuals are able to be more vocal and play with the HIV POZ Fetish.

He says they are able to “get their feet wet” without taking a plunge into the pool. Meaning these men are usually on PREP and really don’t want to become HIV positive.

TRUVADA for PrEP, is a once-a-day pill that if used correctly can prevent HIV by up to 90%, it has provided safety for many within the gay community -- but there is a steep price for the medication.

Regardless of strides made in the field of medicine, one bug chaser who is a lawyer and who has been HIV positive for 10 years, but wanted to remain anonymous because of his job and possible future opportunities, had this to say on why many men would still want the HIV virus.

“Bug chasing is about confronting health teachers, priests and fathers who told us we were faggots. HIV is about having a family, and it’s my way of telling my guy that I got him. I want to own this and show him the way through this.

If I have anything to contribute to the theory of gay sexuality, it's this: With bug chasing you get to pick your daddy, or gift giver, and there's no limit to how many people you can have in your family."