

Bears & Health

Safer Sex Parties



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In my field of addiction medicine, we view addiction as a chronic disease, like diabetes, which can be well-controlled but for which there is as yet no cure. For treatment, there are two big approaches. The first, abstinence, is the simplest but most difficult: quit drinking alcohol, for example, and stay quit with the aid of recovery programs and/or therapy. The second is harm reduction. Here, you don't try to make people quit their habit, which so often just doesn't work; rather, you work with them to minimize the harm they do to themselves and others--e.g., needle exchanges and methadone maintenance for heroin addicts. And there are programs that combine the two approaches, like Weight Watchers and Sexual Compulsives Anonymous.

In the worlds of gay men and sex, even where sexual compulsivity isn't the issue, both concepts are important. It's fruitless to pretend that monogamy is a workable path for all gay men for all our lives. So, accepting that gay men - for that matter, most folks, male and female, gay, bisexual, straight, younger and older - are going to continue to play, to party, from time to time, how can the harm - primarily the spread of HIV and other STD's - that can result be reduced?

Enter Jack and Vince, the hosts of New York's Bear Cave. I use the word hosts purposely because that's where this experience begins to differ from other sex emporiums, espe-

cially the bathhouses. Instead of reinforcing any sense of shame and guilt about who you are and what you are doing, Jack and Vince want the experience to be just the opposite - genuinely fun, affectionate, a place where people laugh and socialize, where the energies are positive. In fact, Jack has been known on more than one occasion to eject those who exhibit a lot of attitude. The decor is thoughtful and attractive, the music - Jack's own mix - sophisticated and serene. There's a nice bar, complementary snacks and drinks, comfortable furniture and consistently good vibes from the hosts.

So what about safer sex? When you walk in the door, you are greeted by Jack - a big, burly bear you definitely would not want to mess with - who explains the rules: NO BAREBACKING! If you are witnessed engaging in unprotected anal sex, you will be ejected and never allowed back on the premises. Since there are essentially no private areas - no doors and no back rooms - and the lighting is never lower than dim, and Jack and Vince continually monitor the premises themselves, it's a rule that's never broken.

Everywhere throughout the club there are bowls of condoms and lube and paper towels. There's a shower, soap and fresh towels. And a mega-bottle of mint-blue Listerine. Why not the regular Listerine, which has a higher alcohol content and is probably a

more effective germ-killer? "We tried that," Jack said, "and people weren't using it. It's too strong and unpleasant tasting for a lot of folks, so we're going with this." Needless to say, there is no enforcing of the condoms rule for oral sex, even as periodic escalations in the rates of syphilis and gonorrhea make front page headlines in the Blade and LGNY.

Since this is essentially a bear orgy, and bears are prone to pediculosis (body lice - crabs, scabies), what can be done? Jack says that before and after each gathering, he and Vince thoroughly spray all the furniture with a pediculocide, which appears to be effective.

Jack is likewise thoughtful regarding the absence of safer sex literature and advisories on the walls or on the magazine table that otherwise features *American Bear*, *Bear*, *Bulk Male* and *American Grizzly* magazines. "I just didn't think it would work," he says. "I think we're doing what we can on the issue of safer sex. It's a lot more than most and what we've achieved here is a careful balance that works."

(Jack and Vince can be reached at: NYBearCave@aol.com)