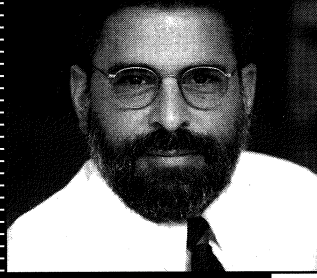


OVEREATING & DEPRESSION: RESULTS OF THE FIRST BEARS & HEALTH SURVEY



Bears&Health/
Lawrence D. Mass, MD

Around the time I wrote my "Bears and Health" chapter for Les Wright's Bear Book II (forthcoming from Haworth Press), and which was serialized in American Bear, I discovered that I had a colleague who was doing complementary and groundbreaking work in the same area. In fact, Steve Albert, director of HIV services of the Callen-Lorde Health Center in New York City and a woofy former Mr. New York Bear, had begun writing his own column on bears and health for the newsletter of Manhattan's Metrobears. But Albert's column was a first not only for the Metrobears and bear organization newsletters, it was also pioneering in its approach. Having recently completed his masters degree in public health, Albert did what was doubtless the first health survey ever conducted of a bear community. And what he discovered is eye-opening.

This premiere survey consisted of a checklist of medical problems that people might be concerned about – e.g., diabetes, high blood pressure, asthma, arthritis – but it also included other health issues, such as drug use (with listings of specific drugs – e.g., alcohol and marijuana), as well as such other conditions and circumstances as unemployment, stress, poverty, loss/bereavement, ageing, domestic violence, eating disorders, and depression. Although the sample of readers he drew from was small

(less than 100), here's what he found:

As published in "Metropolitan Bear" (11/98), the NYC Metrobears Newsletter, Albert found that the greatest overall health concerns, were as follows: 1) Eating Disorders (Compulsive Overeating), 2) Depression 3) HIV/AIDS 4) Health Insurance (un- or underinsured) and 5) Stress. In further musings in that issue of the newsletter and in conversations with me subsequently, Albert indicated his surprise that there was so little concern about drug use, which confirmed my suspicion that because bears tend to be a somewhat older community, we see less drug use than in other circuit subcultures. That's not to say that drug abuse, especially alcoholism (even it's mostly "just beer"), isn't a presence among us. But we probably score better than the Chelsea/circuit party boys here.

In subsequent columns, Albert began looking at the five categories. Noting that overeating and weight gaining are almost bear pasttimes, and that anyone attempting to pathologize them was in for sexual politics trouble, he nonetheless opened up the subjects of diet and exercise. The other subject he began to explore before leaving for Provincetown this summer was depression.

To what extent is depression bound up with eating disorders? What can we do about it?

Although it must be emphasized that Albert's sampling of bears was very limited and by no means representative, it is certainly worth pondering that we ourselves cite eating disorders/compulsive overeating as our number one concern. That's what we ourselves are admitting, even if we also feel that heavysset or even overtly fat people are attractive, in contrast to those who are thin; even if we also agree

that overweight folk and are often subject to prejudice.

What can be done about eating disorders? Unfortunately, there is obviously no simple answer or treatment. If there were a penicillin for eating disorders, many of us would be taking it and the manufacturers making vast fortunes. There is a long history of medical treatments for obesity, mostly pills, and some of them have been effective, at least in the short run. However, most of these – various forms of amphetamine or "speed" – turned out to be addictive and or otherwise dangerous (such as the recent "phen-phen," derived from amphetamine and causing heart-valve damage.) More drastic measures have included surgical procedures that involve the removal and/or stapling of the parts of the stomach and intestine. Other approaches have been psychological and/or spiritual. There is a 12-step program based on Alcoholics Anonymous called Overeaters Anonymous with which some people do unquestionably stay "gustationally" sober, at least for varying periods of time.

Diet approaches number in the thousands. Most work on the most basic and simple of principles: the lowering of fat and sugar intake. In recent years, there has been an explosive increase in the use of antidepressants because of the success of the family of antidepressants known as the serotonin reuptake inhibitors. The best known of these

Continues on page 40...

Lawrence D. Mass, M.D., is a co-founder of Gay Men's Health Crisis in New York City and the author/editor of four books, including, most recently, *We Must Love One Another Or Die: The Life and Legacies of Larry Kramer* (St. Martin's Press). You may address questions or comments to Dr. Mass via our mailing address or Email address.

recorded. I thought these could not be improved upon however the reproductions are flawless. This is good solid-to-the-core country with a folk sort of attitude. *Greatest Hits: Gail Davies* is available on Little Chickadee Records, PO Box 129545, Nashville TN 37212. [Also, while vacationing in Nashville this July, I was able to see Dolly Parton up-close-and-personal on the set of a new movie she is working on. Foregoing the normal blonde wig stacked to the roof her character calls for short red hair. It was a whole new Dolly. I will keep you posted on the flick.] (Cousin Charlie)

Millennium Dance Fever. **2K "Fuck the Millennium"** (Blast First / Mute) finds the resurrected persona of KLF, the Justified Ancients of Mu Mu, back in full piss-and-vinegar form and cash-cowing in on the Y2K craze. (Always at the vanguard, "Fuck the Millennium" was released in 1997.) After dabbling as the K Foundation art saboteurs, 2K return to the scene of the crime and deconstruct their famous dance-trance rhythms into a scathing anthem for the new millennium. But if you've resolved yourself that it's *two-thousand-zero-zero-party-over*, check out the **Why? 2K Anti-Millennium Party** (Uni) collection, featuring such wide-ranging Armageddon end-it-all ditties such as The Gap Band "You Dropped a Bomb on Me," Oingo Boingo "Dead Man's Party" to Maureen McGovern "The Morning After" and R.E.M. "It's the End of the World As We Know It (And I Feel Fine)." (JSA)

ON-LINE

What's more fun than a barrel of ceramic "sproing" monkeys? A boxing rabbi puppet perhaps? Most likely, a side-splitting read of the hilarious copy accompanying such wacky items at Seattle's **Archie McPhee** on-line store <<http://www.archiemcphee.com>>. Entertaining

without even nudging your credit card balance dangerously forward...although you'll probably be tempted throughout. What respectable bruin wardrobe is complete without a sumo wrestler T-shirt? For the cowpokin' lifestyle, check out the equally oddball **Ruby Montana's Pinto Pony** <<http://www.rubymontana.com>> with it's channeling Chihuahua (Louie L'Amour) and purchase a kitsch talking steer head for your dashboard. *Mooooo...* (JSA)

TELEVISION

HBO's cutting-edge drama, **Oz**, portrays an in-your-face and knife-to-the-throat life inside the gritty Oswald penitentiary. Abusing drugs, sex, power and privilege, the series present a no-holds-barred life-out-of-control for Oswald's guards, prisoners, families, and administrators. Each adheres to their own rules, albeit the law, tradition, brotherhood, faith, or an gut sense of "right" and each, in turn, is held captive to the demons and dreams such commitment demands. Although the show's erotic factor first grabs many a bruin fan by the testicles – Oz graphically portrays male nudity and man-to-man sex – queer sex is mostly used as a weapon of non-consensual degradation, manipulation, and violence. Rather than a John Gage fantasy on cable television, HBO's powerhouse prison drama is more so *Scared Straight*. There are no safe words; no safe sex. Consistently captivating stories, top-notch acting, and quality production worthy of your attention. (JSA)

Agree? Disagree? Let's hear from you: **JS (Jim) Adams** <artbear@iglou.com>; **Kevin John** <LiLiPUT1@aol.com>; and **Charlie Myers** <CUZZNCHAS@aol.com>.

Bears & Health continued...

include Prozac, Zoloft, Paxil and Effexor. In the course of working with these medications, researchers noticed that they often have a side effect of dampening sexual drive, and wondered if these drugs might have some dampening effect on craving in general that could be used to treat compulsivity disorders such as sexual compulsivity, overeating and the craving for nicotine upon

cessation of smoking or other drug use. While some people do feel that their craving for sex, for food or other drugs/stimulants has diminished with the use of antidepressants, there are no statistics suggesting that such effects can be relied upon. When all is said and done, when and where there is success in dieting and weight reduction, virtually all approaches share the

same fundamental feature: positive motivation and determination – a willingness to make a real effort involving sacrifice and work – on the part of the participant. Without that, and short of a miracle pill/cure, change will not come about. More on depression and overeating in our next column.