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Jeremy explains: "I've had unsafe sex when I was really drunk and it was anonymous one-night stands. We met at bars or bathhouses. [Friends] I was with sometimes—usually not—made attempts to protect me.

"It's almost like I want to make it similar to a fetish," Jeremy continues. "That's what was turning me on, the barebacking and the fact that it was anonymous and dangerous. I never asked guys not to use condoms, but if they weren't using them it was OK. When you go to these places it's about being somebody else. It's a fantasy when I'm getting fucked.

"But it's not a fantasy—it's me and it can't happen anymore," he says with determination.

Finally, silence legitimizes the misplaced notion that sexual roles can protect us. "I'm a top," George says, "and I almost never use a condom. I justify that because I get tested every six months."

Darien concurs. "I usually top," he says. "And that's my rationale for being careless."

Yet, while it's true that the bottom is at higher risk during anal sex, studies have shown that HIV infection has also occurred among men who report as tops only.

Curiously, silence is often interpreted in polar ways. Some men take it to mean that their partner is automatically negative and therefore engage in riskier behavior. Others assume everyone is potentially positive and are responsible for the choices they make and the risks they take. Most confusingly, the same per-

"The messages in bars are same old, same old. They are like the little things they give you on airplanes. Everybody's heard it, and nobody pays attention to it."

—Darien

son can often interpret silence in either way depending on the situation or who he is with.

Yet, a failure to communicate can have damaging effects, both physically and emotionally. James, a 39-year-old salesman, says: "I know a guy who is HIV-positive, and he has said that it is the responsibility of the other person to ask, not his to tell. But the guys he is with are freaking out once they find out. If you have a disease that can kill another person, you have the responsibility to tell them."

Or as Eddie tells me: "I [sometimes] wonder if I've shared it with anyone. A couple of people who I've slept with told me after the fact that they had HIV. We had anal intercourse. I brought it up and then they said, 'Oh, me too.' The guys were not wearing condoms."

Let's talk about sex

So where does all of this leave us? How can we break through the conspiracy of silence and begin communicating about HIV in a way that doesn't inhibit the sexual experience?

Atlanta-based psychologist John R. Ballew recommends that "we have the conversation

about sex in general, not just HIV." He says we should ask: "Where is the person in general? What do you like to do sexually? How do you feel about condoms?" While this may seem like an intimidating solution, anyone who's ever had phone sex knows that talking about it can be just as hot as doing it.

Ballew also feels we need to change the focus of safer-sex education. "A lot of [the messages] assume that semen is toxic waste," he says. "But that just doesn't jibe with how most gay men are about semen. What's missing is the conversation about all kinds of sex that's completely safe, exploring someone's body, playing with them, touching them, rather than focusing on the stuff we can't do."

In other words, we should eroticize the alternatives. Organizations like Oakland, Calif.-based Body Electric and Portland-based Queer Love Action Network for Discovery teach us to do just that. Body Electric offers its



"Blow jobs are the gay man's handshake"
—John R. Ballew

two-day workshop "Celebrating the Body Erotic" twice a year in Portland. (The next one is in November. Visit www.bodyelectric.org). Q-LAND offers "Men Massaging Men" on the third Wednesday of each month. (Visit www.qland.org.)

Another thing we can do is recognize that the fear-based messages of the past don't work anymore. We must find new ways of conveying thoughts on safer sex. One approach is through humor. South African writer Steve Quinn recently teamed up with Canadian animation producer

Firdaus Kharas to create a public service campaign starring three talking prophylactics. The aptly named Shaft, Dick and Stretch—or "Three Amigos"—have one main concern: getting laid. Their libidos challenge the stigma of the condom itself and the reluctance some people have in using them.

So far, 20 different ads starring "The Three Amigos" have appeared to great acclaim in South Africa and Canada. Several U.S. organizations, universities and hospitals have requested and received tapes.

We have a long way to go toward breaking the conspiracy of silence. If, as Ballew says, "blow jobs are the gay man's handshake," gay and bi men need to recognize that a good-faith agreement comes with a sexual encounter—even an anonymous one. Talking about HIV and sex means recognizing our responsibility to one another. And to ourselves. **J**

FLOYD SKLAVER is a Portland free-lance journalist.

"That's what was turning me on, the barebacking and the fact that it was anonymous and dangerous"

—Jeremy

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