

# Loving Yourself to Love Others

By Sandra K. Trisdale, Ph.D.

Having safer sex reduces risk of HIV infection and reinfection (superinfection). Even though it can be difficult to do, some people insist on only having safer sex for this reason. They are not putting themselves or their partners at risk. And they're having a great time. How are they doing it?

People who have safer sex tend to have a lot of characteristics in common:

- **Comfort with sexual identity:** Whether they are gay, straight or bisexual, they admit who they are and who they like to have sex with.
- **Comfort with drug-free (and alcohol-free) sex:** If people are too drunk to know who they went home with, they were probably too drunk to think about safer sex. Sober sex is much more likely to be safer sex.
- **Commitment:** Safer sex isn't something they consider optional. These are the "no glove, no love" folks. Some folks in their teens, twenties, and even thirties have never had unprotected sex – and never had a sexually transmitted disease, either. Some HIV+ people decide after diagnosis that "the buck stops here" – and have *never* had unprotected sex since.
- **Self-esteem:** The more you appreciate your own self-worth, the more likely you are to insist on safer sex. So what if someone rejects you because of it? Only losers insist on unsafe sex – and if you feel you've got something worthwhile to offer, you know you'll attract a winner soon enough.
- **Respect:** Meaning self-respect as well as respect for others.
- **Concern about health:** People who have safe sex are concerned about their own health and are unwilling to take risks with it.
- **Comfort with intimacy:** Quickie sex with a total stranger, especially in a public setting, is least likely to be safer sex. Sex that involves intimacy, knowledge of the other person and sharing of personal information is more likely to be safer sex.
- **Personal identity:** People who have safer sex are less likely to give in to pressure from a partner because they have a good sense of who they are and what they want. They are ready to counter a line like, "But don't you trust me?" with a reply like, "Why should I, when you're trying to talk me into something dangerous?"

So loving yourself to love others means learning to be

more like this yourself and insisting on partners who share your views and concerns.

Sometimes old issues get in the way for people. People with a history of sexual abuse, especially in childhood, may have real problems feeling strong enough to negotiate safer sex. People with a history of depression seem less likely to engage in good self-care sexually. If you have problems that you feel are getting in your way, consider therapy, self-help groups, or other ways of trying to mend.

But even if you feel strong and healthy emotionally, does this mean you won't ever be tempted? Of course not. How do you deal with the temptation to have unsafe sex?

- **Plan ahead:** Think of situations which might tempt you in the future, and anticipate how you will deal with them. "Let's live for the moment, baby" thinking leads to a lot of disease transmission. Think about more than the moment – think about the rest of your life.
- **Keep safer sex supplies around everywhere** – not just the bedroom, but in your car, in your backpack, in your purse, in your gym bag, in your jacket pockets. You won't have to deal with the temptation of "I really want to and we don't have any protection available..."
- **Again, avoid mixing sex with drugs or alcohol.** You can deal with temptation much better when you're sober.
- **If you're positive, remember how angry you felt at the person you think infected you,** whether you knew specifically who it was or not. Do you really want someone feeling that way towards you?
- **If you're negative, take a hard, cold look at what being HIV+ really involves.** Do you want to have to face prejudice, possible medication side effects and all the rest, if you don't have to?
- **If you slip once, don't fall for the "it doesn't matter now" thinking.** Jump right back on the safer sex bandwagon. You can still keep your risk lower.

Remember that the love you give others will be so much better when you love yourself enough to take care of you and your partner. 📧

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