Uplifting Sexual Health for Men

Two men find different paths to sexual health.

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Sex is meant to be enjoyed, right? Sexual health is key to making that happen. When we're fully taking care of our sexual selves—not just our bodies but also our minds and our emotions—physical intimacy has more to offer.

Take Jaron Benjamin and José Sanchez. They're both New Yorkers. Benjamin, 40, is vice president of a services and advocacy agency, and is straight. Sanchez, 27, is a graduate student in Latin American and Caribbean studies and is gay. But the two men have been on a similar journey, one where caring for themselves overall goes hand in hand with a better sex life.

For Benjamin, who is African American, that journey involved coming to terms with being a survivor of sexual violence as a child and teenager at the hands of both relatives and peers. In college, not only did he find that he was inexplicably blocked when it came to being physically intimate with people he was otherwise attracted to, he says, but his drinking got really out of control as well. "It was about self-worth," he says. "I felt so bad about who I was, like I deserved to be dead." Less than a month out of rehab, he attempted suicide on his 22nd birthday. "And that was my last drink."

But then the real work began, especially after a date told him about her past sexual assaults. "Out of thin air, I said, 'Well, that happened to me too—I should probably go talk to someone.' The healing started when I became an activist, talking to other athletes about how we live in a rape culture that society enables. And I had a lot of therapy. I really wanted to be able to have a meaningful, lasting relationship where I felt comfortable expressing myself sexually."

As for Sanchez, who is Latino, he started having sex with men in college. But he'd grown up hearing that gay sex was linked to getting HIV. "I carried that fear into my sex life," he says. "I insisted on condoms, but I was still worried about getting HIV all the time and didn't do a lot of things that I wanted to do."

An HIV scare sent him to one of New York City's public health clinics. He tested HIV negative, but a clinic staffer told him about pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP), a daily one-pill regimen that prevents HIV infection. Some say, it's akin to birth control for gay men, but in fact, anyone at risk for HIV, including women and transgender people, can take it. Sanchez consulted with his primary care provider and gave it a try.

In different ways, both Benjamin and Sanchez took proactive steps toward caring for not just their sexual health but also their happiness. And that's important, says Asa Radix, MD, PhD, senior director of research and education at New York City's Callen-Lorde Community Health Center and vice chair of the board of the American Sexual Health Association (ASHA).

ASHA's website, ashasexualhealth.org, is a wealth of sexual health information, including where to find a caring sexual health provider near you even if you don't have insurance.

"Sexual health is all about being able to embrace and enjoy your sexuality throughout your life, because it's an important part of life," says Radix. "Often, people think of it as being only about getting treated for sexually transmitted infections (STIs), but it's also about your emotional and mental well-being in relation to sexuality."

Radix urges people to be open and honest with their primary care providers about all matters related to sex—including what he calls those worrisome "drips and itches" in the genital or anal area, sexual or erectile dysfunction and past traumas (such as Benjamin's) as well as coercion or physical or verbal abuse by an intimate partner. "It's useful to write out a list of questions or concerns beforehand," he says. "You're less likely to forget or lose your nerve that way."

Ideally, says Radix, a provider will gently bring up sexual health as a part of your overall health, but not all providers are trained to do so—something organizations like ASHA are trying to change. If your provider isn't open to hearing your concerns around sex, he says, you may want to look elsewhere.

You may want to discuss with your provider regularly getting tested for STIs, such as HIV, syphilis, gonorrhea and chlamydia, even if you believe you're in a monogamous relationship—you don't necessarily know your partner's entire sexual history. You may want to discuss preventive options, such as condoms, going on PrEP or getting vaccinated for hepatitis A or B or for human papillomavirus (HPV), some strains of which are known to cause various types of cancer.

You may also want to discuss an inability to feel sexually aroused, maintain an erection or have an orgasm. A good provider can help you determine whether such problems are related to side effects from medications you are taking, low testosterone or depression, anxiety or other mental health conditions.

"Everyone's story is unique," says Radix, "so don't be embarrassed because sex is meant to be enjoyed."

That's what Sanchez has discovered. Going on PrEP three years ago "really changed the game" for him, he says. "I can really get into sex more and let myself go without sexually endangering myself." And because PrEP requires getting tested for not just HIV but all STIs every three months—and getting treated if necessary—he says he feels like he's taking care of not just his own sexual health but also that of his sex partners. "It's an act of love for myself and for my community," he says. "HIV is still out there, but we can stop the spread—and end the stigma around it too."

As for Benjamin, he eventually met a woman who stuck by him through some of the roughest years of his healing from his sexual trauma. “There were days when all I could do was cry, but she gave me a lot of time and space and made me feel good in a way nobody else had.” They are now married and bringing up two little girls. “I’ve never had better or more fulfilling sex with anybody,” he said. “And it’s because she made me feel safe and cared for.”

Click here to read 10 tips for improving your sexual health.

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