

*Stigmatized Grief:
Lessons Learned
from AIDS*

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The Early Days of AIDS: Uncertainty and Panic

- The first cases of AIDS reported in 1981.
- High Mortality Rate (1984, 7,699 new cases, 3,665 deaths). Most thought it was a death sentence.
- The cases disproportionately effected gay and bisexual men, a highly stigmatized group
- Rumors in the gay community ranged from conspiracies (government infecting gay men) to dire predictions (every gay man will die).
- The disease was label, Gay Cancer then GRID (Gay Related Immune Deficiency),

Similarity with COVID 19

- Disproportionately affecting stigmatized groups: older people, persons in ill health, African Americans
- Slow action from US government; in early years no test, no treatment
- Impact on community is medical, emotional and economic
- Blame, prejudice, discrimination, violence toward those suspected of bringing to US

Differences with Covid

- HIV transmission through body fluids (blood, semen, vaginal fluids); Covid-19 is airborne, thus much more infectious and wider distribution of cases.
- Covid prevention guidelines more restrictive (social distancing), which interrupts basic social relating. No hugs.
- Technology and social media advances provide new options for connecting and messaging.

Fear Breeds Prejudice

- Prejudice (e.g. racism, heterosexism, classism) may become latent but re-emerge in the face of danger (e.g. anti-Asian prejudice).
- Stigmatized groups (perceived disposable) may receive less adequate and more restrictive treatment.
- William F. Buckley proposed tattooing infected gay men and placing in “camps”.

Lessons Learned from AIDS

- Public Health messages must be clear, consistent, fact and science-based to be trusted.
- Some communities have less trust of government messages based on their individual and collective experiences of past oppression.
- Culturally specific approaches may be needed in communities with histories of group trauma and harm.
- Individuals who are more resistant to public health restrictions may need individual or small group outreach by trusted members of their own community.

More Lessons Learned

- Marginalized individuals and communities often internalize negative messages from the dominant culture.
- Under the pressure of social isolation, these internalized messages may become more prominent causing distress, anger, anxiety, depression.
- Individuals may use unhealthy coping mechanism such drug and alcohol abuse and unhealthy sex.
- These responses must be differentiated from “righteous anger” associated by past trauma and current injustice.

Community Action “Act Up”

A proud legacy from the AIDS epidemic was the evolution of Community Action

- Community partnership with health departments to provide community-based support services (Shanti, Stop AIDS Projects, Project Inform, AIDS Health Project)
- Community political action to demand quality health care and fair treatment (Act Up)
- Much of the AIDS political action playbook was derived from the US Civil Rights Movement.

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