

Terrence Higgins Trust Counselling Services

Counselling gay men in serodiscordant
relationships

presentation by

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Counselling Services in London



- 10 counselling staff contracted to provide 110 client sessions per week
- 9 sites around London where counselling is provided
- Counselling services:
 - Anyone affected by HIV, one-to-one or couple counselling
 - Young people, 16-25
 - Any gay man concerned about sex, relationships, sexual health, sexual identity
 - Culturally appropriate emotional support for African people with HIV
- Partnerships with other agencies:
 - Blackliners
 - Body & Soul
 - Healthy Gay Living Centre
 - PACE
 - Streetwise Youth

Presenting Issues – Couples

- Communication difficulties or Arguments
- Different needs: closeness or independence
- Jealousy/Freedom: monogamy/open relationship
- Care and support needs
- Sex issues, including sexual dysfunction
- Coping with difference
- Cultural/social differences, including ethnic origin

What can help in Counselling

- Listening and really hearing each other
- Understanding why partner behaves as he does
- Understanding why he himself behaves thus
- Learning to negotiate with each other
- Finding ways to care for and support each other
- Remembering how to have fun with each other
- Valuing each other's uniqueness
- Not raking over past events during arguments

Some elements of counselling theory

- Beliefs, Values, Assumptions
- Problem-solving, Reality-testing, Conflict Resolution
- Feelings, Spontaneity, Fun, including Sexuality
- Caring, Compassion, Psychological 'Holding'
- Closeness <-----> Freedom
- Relationship developmental stages

Elements of counselling theory - 1

Beliefs, Values, Assumptions

How do the couple relate on this level? What assumptions are held by each of the partners, e.g. around how to care for someone when they're ill? If you grew up in a family where, when you were ill, everyone left you alone in privacy and tiptoed about the house, you might feel overwhelmed if your partner comes from a background where the assumption is that someone who is ill should be showered with attention, special treats and loving care 24 hours a day.

Another example might be the question of whether a relationship should be monogamous or open to other sexual relationships. Or even something as simple as 'Do you do the washing up immediately after dinner or leave it till morning?'

Elements of counselling theory - 2

● Problem-solving, Reality-testing, Conflict Resolution

Are the partners able to discuss their difficulties from an 'adult' perspective? This isn't about judging arguments as childish, but whether two people can ever agree to disagree, for example. Is it possible for both partners to, as it were, stand outside the problem to consider it from a more 'objective' standpoint?

How do the partners cope with difference, in the relationship? If one partner is an early-morning person and the other is an evening person, for example, can they find ways to live with this difference?

What are the assumptions about how conflict should be dealt with? It may be assumed by one partner that if you're angry about something, the appropriate response is to sit on it and hope that you both feel better when it's all blown over; the other partner's response could be 'It's best to have a good row and get it over with.' If two partners have very different responses to such situations, it may be very hard for them to resolve conflict.

Elements of counselling theory - 3

● Feelings, Spontaneity, Fun, including Sexuality

Can the two partners have fun together? It is probably true to say that most gay men are good at relating on this level, at least in the early stages of a relationship. But expectations can also run high, since the gay scene is a place where you are supposed to have fun all the time, if possible. The reality of being in a relationship may be somewhat different, but the ability to be spontaneous and express feelings appropriately can help.

Having a good sexual relationship is usually easier at the start. But as well as the usual problem of the fading of sexual desire, gay men with HIV are more likely than most to suffer from sexual dysfunction. This can be for psychological reasons: being HIV positive can make us feel less desirable, for example, or there may be a strong fear of infecting others, especially the partner. Or it may be physical, either as a side-effect of anti-depressants or treatment drugs, or from the direct effects of HIV, or from ageing. If there is a psychological component, then psychosexual counselling can help.

Elements of counselling theory - 4

● Caring, Compassion, Psychological 'Holding'

Are the partners good at caring for each other, and taking care of each other? In a serodiscordant relationship it can seem as though this element is unevenly balanced, whether or not the positive partner has been ill. It is likely that he will at times need more support and understanding than his partner, and have a need to be understood. This last need may be difficult to meet, given that someone without HIV can never fully understand what it is like to be diagnosed positive.

On the other hand, the negative partner may feel that he cannot express his own needs for support, or his anxieties about his partner, or his fears of being infected, because that would be to place an extra burden on the other.

Couple counselling can help the two to express their needs in a neutral setting, and to understand each other's points of view.

Elements of counselling theory - 5

● Closeness <-----> Freedom

Where do the two partners fit on the spectrum of intimacy as opposed to independence? One partner may be more affectionate, wanting to spend a lot of time in the other's company, perhaps wanting to live together and do everything together. This man may feel insecure or abandoned if his partner is at the other end of the scale, and prefers to live his life with his own individual interests and friendships. The freedom-loving partner may want an open relationship, enjoying being off his face and going clubbing with his mates every weekend, and having lots of sex. The other partner is more likely to want monogamy, and perhaps to become depressed if he feels his needs are not met. The more independently-behaved partner might feel resentful if he thinks he is being asked to curb his activity. It is easy to see how these issues might get played out in a serodiscordant relationship. The two extremes can fit with being either negative or positive.

Elements of counselling theory - 6

● Relationship developmental stages

Another factor to consider in a relationship may be the stage that the partners are at in terms of how they feel about the couple. In the earlier days of a relationship, it is likely that both partners will want to spend a lot of time with each other, doing things together and being even quite dependent on each other's company. Later, it is to be expected that they will start to develop more independent interests, and want to express themselves in different ways. This move towards individuality may go quite a long way, to people leading separate lives for a while. Ultimately it is likely that they will find ways to be comfortable with each other again in a renewed intimacy.

Problems arise if the partners do not move at the same pace through these stages, or if one or both partners becomes 'stuck' at a particular stage. Then there is likely to be conflict, and sometimes problematic behaviour.

Once again, these issues can be brought to light and worked with in counselling.