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Most gay men have been in a relationship. And about two-thirds are in a relationship at any time. Although relationships can vary greatly, one thing they have in common is that they all contain agreements of some kind.

One reason why many gay men negotiate agreements is to manage expectations. For many, these agreements support gay identity, enhance relationship quality and improve sexual satisfaction. HIV and STI prevention are other reasons why some men negotiate an agreement.

For some, this may mean a long-term intimate relationship with only one person. For others, this may mean a loving relationship with one partner but sexual activity with others – “playing together” and sometimes separately. Others may have a series of short-term relationships with different people. Each relationship is a challenge with or without HIV.

This factsheet will address the important issues of relationship agreements for HIV positive gay men.¹ Personal stories offer strategies and practical tips on the important issues of relationships and relationship agreements. Topics covered include: What gay men have agreements about, their understandings of the agreement, and, how and why agreements change?

How do you tell your partner you broke the agreement? How would you respond if your partner told you he had done something which broke the agreement?

Greg: I still believe in relationships whether they're pos-neg or pos-pos. Love them and believe in the idea of love as irrational as it can be and as rational as it can be.

Relationship agreements

Rules of the heart
between gay men

There is no blueprint
for a relationship.

Relationships can be
as varied as the
individuals involved.

Relationships

For many men a good relationship is something that is mutually negotiated between partners. It is about open communication and taking responsibility for the relationship.

“**Terry:** It’s about communicating from the beginning what a relationship should be. Consider what is a reasonable amount of time to find out what the boundaries are for each other? Is it different for each situation and person? It’s about getting to know the person which takes time. You can’t find out these things quickly.

Graeme: A good relationship is open, honest, good communication, love, tolerance and good sex. You bring your expectations to any relationship. It can be worth reflecting on what those expectations of both yourself and your partner might look like.

Rick: I got out of the idea of falling into something and being unbridled and uncontrolled and turned my thinking around to taking responsibility for the relationship. [...] Two partners take responsibility for the relationship so the relationship is healthy and is something to hold up.

Others suggest that communication can have its limits and you need to work out what are the important things to share.

“**John:** In a good relationship you seek to be close together but paradoxically you realise there are things you can’t share and there are things that you can’t discover about the other person. You desire to and that’s part of the relationship. I think, particularly if you’ve got a sero-discordant relationship, that’s something that you’re going to have to deal with from both perspectives: neg and pos perspectives.

Some challenges: expectations and pressures

For many coming to a shared understanding about sex (e.g. using condoms or even talking about having sex with other people) is a difficult conversation to have. While some gay men value monogamy for its “role in both defining and securing a relationship – and keeping it safe, at least emotionally, they also recognised a certain inevitability of sex outside the relationship”.²

Barry identified his own innate desire for sex outside the relationship.

“**Barry:** The relationship had to eventually “open up” to accommodate sex with other men. The reality is there are some things [desires] that could not be satisfied within the relationship.

Some make a distinction between physical and emotional monogamy and have clear expectations around this issue.

“**Greg:** I wanted emotional monogamy. I told him: “You can have friends who you have sex with but, you come home to me.” I didn’t want him to get emotionally involved with them. [...] He talks about his heart being like a bit of a taxi-cab, there’s always someone else popping in. I want a sports car and I don’t care who drives or navigates, but, I want a sports car two-seater. The cost for me has been the end of a relationship.

communication choice change

Tim acknowledges that gay men's relationships are freer than heterosexual ones but, this may not be the whole picture. All relationships come under pressure to conform to various norms. It's important for people to reflect whether these expectations make them more or less comfortable and happy.

Tim: There're a lot of things to conform to in gay relationships depending on what your particular social group is. There're different pressures in relationships, which are influenced by the cultural settings you find yourself in. There's a lot of pressure to have open relationships [...] and there's also the opportunity to break out and establish your own values.

Many reflected on the irrationality of sex, love and its consequences. For some, while it's important to be aware of expectations it's also good to be flexible.

Roger: There's another big factor that keeps getting pushed under the carpet; the assumption is we're totally rational beings (in a discordant relationship it is rational to practice safe sex) but human beings are not totally rational. We all make mistakes; it's part of being human. It's not a perfect world so I don't see how you can set up a perfect set of rules.

Relationships often begin in physical attraction and the mind follows.

Tim: Any time I've started a relationship, rationality goes out the window. There's all that lust and it evolves from there. You get to know the person and then you start negotiating the relationship.

It can be challenging sticking to the 'rules' where emotions are concerned.

Noel: We have an agreement that we wouldn't have sex outside the relationship without each other. We do it as a pair, these are the rules. You can have all these rules but somewhere in your heart when the emotion gets a hold it all gets lost.

Negotiating boundaries

At different times we desire different things from a relationship. Some relationships may be strictly monogamous while others may be 'open'. Sexual boundaries in a relationship can be extremely difficult to negotiate.

This is how John and Tim put it:

John: Discussing why sex is desired outside the relationship and the effect it may have on intimacy and the relationship is complicated.

Tim: People say we should be talking about sex but it doesn't happen like that ...it's more complex than that. I've been in situations where you don't talk about sex. You sit there wishing you could and it just gets harder over time.

Getting to know each other takes time.

Good communication involves always being respectful to each other.

Relationships are like
most things in life
they change.

Be prepared to
grow, change and
communicate those
changes.

For some, relationships may be marked by avoiding negotiation, lack of disclosure and mutual silence in regard to sexual activity outside the relationship. Obstacles to open discussion included fear of their partner's reactions, fear of conflict, a loss of trust within the relationship and, ultimately, fear of losing the relationship altogether, or "you just don't want to know."

But does the relationship change or end after breaking an agreement? Some comfort may be found in recent research by Prestage, Mao et al.³ with HIV negative men in Sydney where less than half (45.6 per cent of the respondents) reported any impact on their relationship when they discussed breaches of agreements with their regular partner. In fact being "open" and talking about "stuff ups" or "slip ups" with regular partners may improve relationship quality. In Peter's words: "Talking about it brought us closer together."

While for Richard dealing with a broken agreement meant opening himself to be hurt again.

“**Richard:** I didn't deal with it at all. I went into this relationship with someone who said he wanted absolute monogamy. The sex was great; everything was great. We'd go out together and we went home together. I used to travel a lot and decided to surprise him. I found him in my bed having sex with someone else. It wasn't so much about the sex; it was more about the trust. I felt completely and utterly betrayed and I threw him out on the spot. It took me a long time to trust anyone and have another relationship [...] You open yourself to be hurt again.

Many want more open communication about sex and relationships but opinions and anxieties about sex affect how we approach this.

“**Greg:** Once you become HIV positive everyone else has a view of what you should and shouldn't be doing in your sex life.

Chris and John explain that talking about sex is often extremely complicated.

“**Chris:** Intimacy and getting to know a person can be difficult things. They are all challenges to a relationship. Communication's difficult, it's very difficult.

“**John:** It's knowing your partner well enough to pick the right time [...] after 14 years I know him well enough to know when I can talk to him about a particular issue. Again you've got to find something that works for both. It's got to fall on fertile ground too and if the other person isn't willing to communicate then you can talk till you're blue in the face. So it's personal dynamics as well. Sometimes it's very hard to get heard, understood and acknowledged.

And it (communication, 'rules', expectations, pressures) doesn't all happen just at the beginning of the relationship.

“**Gavin:** I think you talk about it less in the beginning because you're too busy doing it. It's like when you're not doing it that's when you start to talk about it and rationalise it. It's certainly changed for me because five years into the relationship, sex changed for me and discussions changed.

communication choice change

Speaking the unspoken

And of course communication is more than verbal; there are also the 'unspoken cues'.

Mick: We're talking about oral communication. There're different ways to communicate and so it's being open and picking up the cues from your partner; there're all sorts of ways to communicate.

Agreements about outside partners varied widely; some had detailed agreements that they spoke directly to their partner about; others agreements were unspoken but understood.

This is how Stephen and Tom put it:

Stephen: There are unspoken rules of the heart, sometimes they can't be articulated ... you just feel around and get a sense of what your partner wants.

Tom: Even though we have not engaged in conversation about sex, we are very happy about our agreement. He's never had a particularly strong sex drive, that's why we've always had an open relationship. I have a high sex drive and he's incredibly low. In terms of our relationship, our commitment or bond, our faith and trust in each other, has never been stronger. We've been together for 11 years.

Relationships go through changes

And how and why do agreements change? Relationships cover a lot of things like affection, intimacy, having somebody to care about and somebody who cares about you. There are dynamics in relationships that change over time. People may have an agreement that evolves into something else as the relationship develops. For some couples agreements are not fixed and they change their agreements as needs in their relationship change.

Greg: I was in a relationship for 10 years, and we'd started out as an open relationship. We were both negative at that point and so we did unprotected sex at home, but had safe sex outside. About three years ago he decided, he wasn't happy with just having outside sex; he wanted longer-term relationships outside. But I disagreed and wasn't emotionally able to cope with that and so it's fallen apart. We live separately now. I'm the one that can't come to terms with the fact that he wants to have what he calls "my fuck-buddies" with whom he can become emotionally as well as sexually involved with.

Communication is about time and place. Sometimes it's better to leave things until the time is right.

Be flexible because after all it's about the dynamics between two people (at least).

Some flexibility is needed to be able to adapt to changes and to negotiate each change.

“**John:** I like things to be a little bit more organic. Depending on the person you meet, what relationship you form with them can be completely different. Depending on who they are and where you are at that time, you can have different things happen. And even within that one relationship it can change as well. It's continually re-negotiating the relationship.

Terry: I've had four significant relationships in my life and the guys haven't been clones of each other. The type of relationship's been different and each was good, bad and indifferent for its own reasons.

Three's a crowd (you, me & HIV)

Are pos-neg relationships different? A relationship where one person is HIV positive and the other is HIV negative has its own set of challenges, anxieties and also strengths. Personal beliefs about risk and intimacy may play a role in making decisions about sex. What seems to be important is risk assessment and management, of what partners might consider doing within the relationship, and what risks this might involve.

“**Paul:** As far as a pos-neg relationship is concerned sex is the issue. I mean I find it difficult having sex with people who are HIV negative even though I do. There's also that thing about disclosure you know. If it's a one-night stand 'do you disclose?' or 'do you not disclose?'" It adds another pressure to the relationship.

Bob: The whole problem with relationships and having HIV is that it restricts you. It's an involuntary restriction; your options emotionally and pragmatically are cut back.

Peter: No matter how well it's discussed or negotiated HIV is this other presence in a relationship. It's always there. Three's a crowd.

For some, sexual pleasure and intimacy means unprotected anal sex. Condoms and what they represent – for example, lack of spontaneity or an acknowledgement of the pos-neg relationship – are seen as a barrier to both sexual pleasure and intimacy. How do you then maintain both pleasure and intimacy while practicing safe sex?

“**Phillip:** That's what I love about sex, I love that spontaneity. I love that fuck on the car or in the pool or wherever, I don't have to think about it. But now I do. As soon as I think about sex with my neg partner I start thinking condoms, I start thinking protection.

Jeff: Underlying these anxieties is the importance of having and maintaining good communication with your partner.

For Richard intimacy can be achieved in many different and unexpected ways.

“**Richard:** Think carefully about intimacy and how we achieve it. Condoms aren't necessarily barriers. Often they open up possibilities for many of us.

Many find at the end of the day, love (and great sex) is less about serostatus and more about the connection between two people.

“**Phillip:** I'm going out with a neg guy. I'm sure we will face our challenges, however I've realised that great sex does not have to be kept between pos men. Sex with someone you love is great.

communication choice change

Stephen: If you ask me about a plan, my next relationship will be pos-pos. But, the romantic part of me would like to think I'll meet someone I've got that spark with and that will get us over anything. It's about being with them, not about what other conditions you have, HIV or otherwise. I think it's about supporting the person on their journey and doing it mutually.

Pos-Pos relationships

While many men are involved in very satisfying pos-neg relationships, some HIV positive men have made the decision to only seek out other positive men for relationships. Disclosure, negotiating sex and safe sex are challenges for people with HIV.

Paul: I've been having pos sex because sometimes dealing with the rejection from neg guys is hard. In negotiating sex you've got to go through the disclosure, then the conversation, then the reassurance and then the sex, which can make you feel quite anxious. It's good to remember what sex was like without all of the steps I now have to take with neg guys.

Jeff: Sex with another pos guy feels completely different. I love the spontaneity. I think pos-pos relationships work for sex.

For Richard there is no simple answer however, sharing experiences with other positive men can help.

Richard: When you're in a pos-pos relationship you're on a journey together. So it's got to be a positive thing emotionally; we learn from each other.

With Brian HIV discrimination and sexual rejection were other obstacles to overcome.

Brian: The thing about having a lot of rejection is you get sharper at negotiating. Eventually I met my partner, we've been together two years, and from the moment I set up the relationship, I set up two things, I set up the disclosure thing and then if that was okay I set up the boundaries of the relationship. I also set up an exit strategy.

While Brett reminds us that STIs (sexually transmitted infections) remain an important health concern in open relationships and pos-pos sex.

Brett: We shouldn't forget the very real issue of contracting an STI when both partners agree to have an open relationship, especially where pos guys want to have unprotected sex with another pos guy.

Sometimes relationships end and it's nobody's fault. It doesn't necessarily mean you have failed.

time
choices ask

Getting information and support

- **People Living With HIV/AIDS (NSW) Inc**
☎ (02) 9361 6011 Freecall 1800 245 677.
A non-profit community organisation representing the interests of people living with HIV/AIDS in New South Wales.
- **The AIDS Council of New South Wales (ACON)**
☎ (02) 9206 2000 Freecall 1800 063 060. A health promotion organisation based in the gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender communities with a central focus on HIV/AIDS.
- **Positive Living Centre (PLC)** ☎ (02) 9699 8756.
Provides a range of structured programs, special events and social activities as well as peer support and health promotion programs for people living with HIV/AIDS.
- **Albion Street Centre Psychology Unit**
☎ (02) 9332 9600. Psychology Unit Manager, 9am–7pm, Mon–Fri.
- **Gay and Lesbian Counselling Service of NSW (GLCS)** ☎ (02) 8594 9596. Outside of Sydney areas call 1800 18 GLCS or 1800 18 4527.
A telephone counselling and information line operates seven days a week from 5.30pm to 10.30pm in the Sydney Metropolitan Area or from outside of NSW.
- **Multicultural HIV/AIDS Service** ☎ (02) 9515 3098
Freecall 1800 108 098. Mon–Fri, 9am–5pm.
Bilingual/bicultural co-workers providing emotional support, advocacy and information to people living with HIV/AIDS from non-English speaking backgrounds.

For regional NSW HIV/AIDS and related services:

Contacts: A Directory of Services for people with HIV/AIDS. Available from People Living With HIV/AIDS (NSW) Inc. ☎ (02) 9361 6011, Freecall 1800 245 677 or visit www.plwha.org.au

Written Resources (available from ACON, AFAO and PLWHA (NSW):

- *HIV+ Gay Sex: A booklet about being gay, Having HIV and Sex*, 2nd Edition, AIDS Federation of Australia (AFAO)/ National Association of People Living With AIDS (NAPWA), 2002.
- *Opposites Attract: For HIV negative partners of HIV positive men*, 2nd Edition, AIDS Council of NSW (ACON), 2005.

Contact People Living With HIV/AIDS (NSW) for other factsheets in our series:

1 Managing side effects – efavirenz; **2** Boosting your energy; **3** Getting started on combination therapy; **4** I want to return to work; **5** Living with body shape change; **6** Positive pregnancy; **7** Clinical trials; **8** A night with tina – methamphetamine & HIV; **9** HIV and your mouth; **10** The dynamics of disclosure; **11** What you need to know about syphilis; **12** Changing horizons: living with HIV in rural NSW; **13** Surviving the Centrelink DSP Review; **14** Growing older: Living longer with HIV; **15** 10 reasons to test for STIs (sexually transmitted infections).

Footnotes

- 1 The material used was derived from a discussion group with both positive and negative men and a series of one on one interviews. All names have been changed.
- 2 Worth, H. et al. (2002) "Somewhere over the rainbow: love, trust and monogamy in gay relationships", *Journal of Sociology*, The Australian Sociological Association, 38(3):237–253.
- 3 Prestage, G., L. Mao, et al. (2006). "HIV risk and communication between regular partners in a cohort of HIV-negative gay men." *AIDS Care*, 2006 Feb; 18(2):166–72.
- 4 What the law says: The *NSW Public Health Act* says that if you have a sexually transmissible medical condition you must tell your partner before sex. Under the current laws, condoms are not a defence if you do not disclose. People Living With HIV/AIDS (NSW) has advocated, and continues to advocate, that the law reflect the importance of condoms in reducing the risk of HIV transmission.



This factsheet was produced with support from the Australian Federation of AIDS Organisations (AFAO).

Produced by the Health Promotion Unit of



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