

# Kat Couric Interviews Eric Rofes

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## 1. Key areas of gay men's sexuality that are not being addressed...

The overarching terrain of gay men's sex—our desires, subcultures, and sex practices—was profoundly traumatized by the advent of AIDS in the 1980s. Having struggled during the 1970s to achieve some degree of community self-determination and individual empowerment around our sex, the arrival of AIDS shattered all that we had gained.

Over the past 25 years, we have suffered nothing less than the violent colonization of our bodies and our desires by a well-intentioned AIDS prevention industry. We have been “educated” to death. Under the rubric of “safer-sex education,” we've been shamed, guilted, told what to do and what not to do. We have been messaged to and marketed to a million times.

I believe that the violence and commodification done to gay men's sex by AIDS prevention has led us to the place where we are at today: where many gay men turn to substances to escape all the noise, all the dissidence, all the static, all the attempts to regulate, control, and direct our desires. What I am saying is that AIDS prevention campaigns targeting gay men—whether it's “use a condom every time” or “HIV stops with me” or anything else—and the symbolic violence they wreak on our bodies and our desires, are what is currently driving unprotected sex, driving crystal use, and driving new infections.

## 2. What role does the circuit play in this?

I continue to feel as I did in 1997 when I wrote *Dry Bones Breathe: Gay Men Creating Post-AIDS Identities and Cultures* (Haworth Press, 1998) that the circuit has been unfairly scapegoated as the site of greatest risk for HIV transmission and substance abuse for gay men. While I have some of my own criticisms of the circuit—especially the circuit as it existed in its heyday—I also recognize the wonderful gifts the circuit has brought into the livers of the gay tribe. I credit the visionary producers of the circuit during the 1988-1993 period with taking bold steps to recreate meaningful rituals for gay men as our lives and our pre-AIDS rituals lie in shambles.

While I understand why circuit producers had to play into the idea that their parties deserved to exist because they were fundraisers for AIDS organizations, I think by becoming defensive, a terrible mistake was made. Men dancing together by itself is a profound contribution to community health and wellness, and having to justify the circuit

to the anti-sex, anti-dance, anti-drug, anti-pleasure crusaders of the 1990s, I believe contributed to the decline of the circuit. It's kind of like leather bars and leather clubs bending over backwards to show how much fundraising they do for the community—as if they have to justify their kinkiness by balancing with such “goodie” activities.

### 3. What role does government play?

I am not sure how to answer the rest of the questions. I think more than anything we need a few years of “time out” from directive AIDS prevention work for gay men. We need to get away from all the messaging, all the marketing, all the “crises of the week” used to terrify gay men into sexual sterility (here I am talking about “new” strains of HIV, or the crisis of crystal, or the crisis of barebacking, or the crisis of low-self-esteem or any of the “second wave” of AIDS we’ve supposedly be seeing over the past 15 years).

I think gay men need time out, time on our own, to heal, to discover, and to return to a place where our sex and desires and bodies were things of joy and excitement, and pleasure and intense spiritual connection. Frankly, many of us have forged our own “time out” from all of the violence sent down to us by AIDS prevention. Many gay men do their very best to avoid the messaging, avoid the social marketing, avoid getting caught up in the drama of crisis about our sex. Many others have turned to substances to provide us with a time out from the dissonance. I think one of the appeals of the circuit and of massive party weekends such as International Mr. Leather or Gay Pride is that one can take a time out from all of the intense marketing and messaging we receive in our everyday lives about what it means to be a gay man, what our sex should be like, what rights we should have or not have...

What effects does the colonization of bodies and desires have on a people when it is allowed to go on for 25 years? Stop already. Stop the madness. Stop the manipulation. Stop telling us things that we know are lies (“condoms are fun!” “drugs are bad!”). Give us a time-out to heal.

### 5. Social Marketing

The use of social marketing as the primary tool in HIV education and prevention has been a disaster with consequences we never imagined. While social marketing might be useful for the simple presentation of non-directive information, AIDS prevention for gay men has almost NEVER been non-directive. Instead social-marketing has become the primary way well-intentioned public health leaders have attempted to colonize the bodies and desires of gay men.

To their credit, gay men have rebelled, resisted, and developed our own sex cultures and sex values that are quite contrary to most social marketing values. It's the difference between abstinence only (“use a condom every time”) and harm reduction (providing people with information and trusting them to move forward on their own volition).

I'll stop there.

Eric Rofes has been an AIDS educator, activist, and prevention theorist for over 25 years. He has served as the founding chair of the Boston Lesbian and Gay Political Alliance, the director of Shanti Project, San Francisco's pioneering AIDS service group, and the executive director of the Los Angeles Gay and Lesbian Community Services Center. He has published twelve books, including *Reviving the Tribe: Regenerating Gay Mens' Sexuality and Culture in the Ongoing Epidemic* (1996) and *Dry Bones Breathe: Gay Mens Creating Post-AIDS Identities and Cultures* (1998). His most recent book, *A Radical Rethinking of Sexuality and Schooling: Status Quo or Status Queer* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2005) includes his most recent thinking on AIDS prevention in the chapter titled "Desires as Defiance: Transgression, Risk Taking, and Resistance to Safe-Sex Education." He is a professor of education at Humboldt State University on the North Coast of California and can be reached at [eerofes@aol.com](mailto:eerofes@aol.com).