AIDS & ABUSE: CHILDHOOD TRAUMA AND HIV VULNERABILITY IN ADULTHOOD

By

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Abstract

There is a growing body of literature suggesting that a history of childhood sexual abuse contributes to heightened vulnerability for HIV infection, but to date there exists a paucity of qualitative research considering the psychological factors that may predispose one to HIV infection. The research reported in this document attempts to identify the manner in which gay men sexually abused as children define and experience safety in their lives as HIV-seropositive adults. The results of this investigation have implications for the psychotherapeutic treatment of persons at risk for HIV infection, as well as those individuals living with HIV/AIDS.

A qualitative approach employing existential phenomenology was used as a framework for this investigation. Three HIV-seropositive gay men acted as co-researchers and conveyed their experiences of safety as survivors of childhood sexual abuse and as persons living with HIV. Each of these men had already established a therapeutic relationship with the researcher, and wanted their experiences to contribute to the care and understanding of others. Their participation in this research was an opportunity for each of the co-researchers to empower himself, and by doing so contribute to the empowerment of others—both survivors of abuse and those who care for them. Each of the co-researchers was provided with a transcript of their initial interview, as well as a thematic analysis of their narratives, and these were subsequently used as tools for further reflection in their therapeutic relationship with me.
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Whoever inquires about our childhood wants to know something about our soul. If the question is not just a rhetorical one and the questioner has the patience to listen, he will come to realize that we love with horror and hate with an inexplicable love whatever caused us our greatest pain and difficulty (Burkhart, cited in Miller, 1990, p. 3)
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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

As the Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome (AIDS) pandemic enters its second decade, it becomes necessary to consider the factors that contribute to the continued proliferation of the disease. AIDS presents one of the greatest challenges facing health care practitioners, behavioral scientists and policy makers in the 1990s (Coates, 1990; Ting & Carter, 1992). AIDS is a lethal illness caused by the Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV), which gradually destroys the T-cells that protect the body against infections. The virus is found in a variety of bodily fluids, but is typically transmitted through unprotected sexual contact and the sharing of unsterilized intravenous needles (Frumkin & Leonard, 1987). An effective cure or vaccine is yet to be developed; as a result, prevention of the disease through behavioral modification remains the only viable option (Coates, 1990; Ting & Carter, 1992).

Many of the existing strategies meant to circumvent the transmission of HIV have proven successful (Coates, 1990); however, there are still members of the “at risk” population that remain resistant to those strategies (Allers & Benjack, 1991; Allers & Benjack, 1992; Allers, Benjack, White & Rousey, 1993; Carballo-Dieguez & Dolezal, 1995; Carmen & Reiker, 1989; Cunningham, Stiffman & Dore, 1994; Kaliski, Rubinson, Lawrance & Levy, 1990; Rosenthal, Moore & Buzzwell, 1994; Schilder & Kort, 1996; Strathdee, Hogg, Martindale, Cornelisse, Craib, Schilder, Montaner, O’Shaunessy & Schechter, 1996; Ting & Carter, 1992; Veiel, unpublished; Zierler, Feingold, Laufer, Valentgas, Kantrowitz-Gordon & Mayer, 1991). As long as current intervention
strategies fail to address all members of the “at risk” population, the incidence of HIV-infection and AIDS will continue to increase.

Education has been the method favoured to effect preventive behavioral modifications (Allers & Benjack, 1992; Coates, 1990, Ting & Carter, 1992). Behavior modification may also serve those individuals who are already infected with HIV. Coates (1990, p. 57) indicates that

Even when the incidence of new infection becomes acceptably low, many infected individuals may benefit from behavioral interventions to prolong life (both in terms of quantity and quality) and reduce morbidity associated with HIV.

As Allers and Benjack (1992) point out, this approach assumes that individuals will be able to incorporate HIV prevention information into their lifestyles so that they can engage in new health promoting behaviors; however, a substantial portion of the population continues to be resistant to educational efforts that aim to modify behaviors that place one at risk for HIV infection (Allers & Benjack, 1991; Allers & Benjack, 1992; Allers et al., 1993; Bartholow, Doll, Joy, Douglas, Bolan, Harrison, Moss, & McKirnan, in press; Carballo-Dieguez & Dolezal, 1995; Carmen & Reiker, 1989; Cunningham et al., 1994; Jinich, Stall, Acree, Paul, Kegeles, Hoff, Coates, 1996; Kaliski et al., 1990; Rosenthal et al., 1994; Schilder & Kort, in press; Strathdee et al., 1996; Ting & Carter, 1992; Veiel, unpublished; Zeirler et al., 1991).

In order to intervene effectively in the transmission of HIV and the occurrence of AIDS, it has become necessary to consider factors that were not initially implicated in the transmission of HIV. If the factors associated with the continuation of self-destructive
behaviors that place one at risk for HIV infection are not addressed, the transmission of HIV will continue, and those individuals already infected with the virus will suffer greater morbidity.
CHAPTER TWO

Review of the Literature

A number of researchers have determined that an unusually large proportion of the HIV-seropositive population are survivors of childhood physical and sexual abuse (Allers & Benjack, 1991; Allers & Benjack, 1992; Allers et al., 1993; Bartholow et al., in press; Carballo-Diegez & Dolezal, 1995; Carmen & Reiker, 1989; Cunningham et al., 1994; Jinich et al., 1996; Kaliski et al., 1990; Schilder & Kort, in press; Strathdee et al., 1996; Veiel, unpublished; Zeirler et al., 1991), and this may be a factor contributing to the practice of high-risk behaviors that place one at risk for HIV infection. For example, Allers & Benjack (1991) report that 65% of the HIV-infected subjects in their study were sexually and physically abused as children. Cunningham et al. (1994) investigated the type of abuse experienced during childhood, and found that the type of HIV risk behaviors practiced during adolescence and young adulthood were correlated with the type of abuse experienced during childhood. Zeirler et al. (1991) found that men who were sexually abused as children were twice as likely to be infected with HIV than men who were not abused as children.

There is a growing but admittedly sparse body of literature that suggests homosexual males are far more likely to suffer physical and sexual abuse than heterosexual males (e.g., Coleman & Remafedi, 1989; Cunningham et al., 1994; Doll, Joy, Bartholow, Harrison, Bolan, Douglas, Saltzman, Moss & Delgato, 1992; Lodico &
Among gay men, the pain from abuse is compounded by the social marginalization and exclusion faced by the gay community at large, resulting in a range of psychosocial and sexual dysfunctions.

It is therefore postulated that the stigma associated with HIV and the oppression faced by homosexuals in this society leave gay men abused as children in a particularly vulnerable position.

Johnson (1994) characterizes incestuous families as puritanical, with negative sexual attitudes and a prevalence of traditional sexual roles. As Schilder & Kort (in press) point out,

Male children who depart from culturally inscribed assumptions surrounding masculinity and male identity frequently incur the disapproval of parents and siblings, a reaction that can take the form of physical, verbal or sexual abuse.

In families that are dysfunctional, young males who do not conform to stereotypical standards are at a much greater risk of suffering all manner of abuses.

Allers & Benjack (1991) maintain that an emotionally traumatized abuse survivor is unlikely to respond positively to educational efforts alone that attempt to minimize the likelihood of contracting HIV and AIDS. According to Allers et al. (1993), the risk for HIV infection is increased as long as the abuse experienced during childhood remains unresolved. As Carmen & Reiker (1989) point out, "after victimization, the victim's view of self and world can never be the same again; it must be reconstructed in order to
incorporate the abuse experience.” The manner in which the abuse experience is incorporated can influence the behavioral responses that reconstruct the view of the survivor.

The manner in which the survivor incorporates the experience of abuse is complex, and involves the interplay of the personal characteristics of the victim, the nature of the abuse and the context in which the abuse occurs (Carmen & Reiker, 1989). Salter (1995) maintains that the distinction between sadistic and nonsadistic abuse is the most effective typology for understanding the dramatic differences in survivors’ abuse experiences. Nonsadistic offenders typically “groom” their victims with gifts and flattery, whereas sadistic offenders use excessive force and physical violence. It is not uncommon for perpetrators to initiate abuse with “grooming” techniques and then adopt force and physical violence as the abusive relationship progresses.

The challenges faced by survivors of childhood abuse vary with the type of abuse experienced. According to Salter (1995), victims of nonsadistic abuse learn to adopt the distorted image their abusers necessarily have of them, whereas victims of sadistic abuse learn to associate their true feelings of vulnerability with malevolence. In order to cope and incorporate their experiences of abuse, survivors of nonsadistic abuse strive for visibility, whereas survivors of sadistic abuse strive for invisibility. Hypothetically, it follows that survivors seeking visibility are made vulnerable through exploitation, whereas those who seek invisibility are made vulnerable through their inability to assert themselves and their needs.

Although coping strategies vary between individuals, chronic depression, revictimization, sexual compulsivity and substance abuse characterize the adult survivor
of childhood abuse and heighten the risk for HIV infection (Carmen & Reiker, 1989; Jinich et al., 1996; Paone, Miller, Shi & Des Jarlais, 1996; Robins, Dew, Davidson, Penkower, Becker & Kingsley, 1994; Schilder & Kort, in press; Strathdee, Patrick, Archibald, Ofner, Cornelisse, Reckart, Schechter & O'Shaughnessy, in press). In their clinical work with abuse survivors, Carmen & Reiker (1989, p.437) have observed “low self-esteem, self hatred, affective instability, poor control of aggressive impulses and disturbed relationships with inability to trust and behave in self-protective ways.” As long as the experience of childhood abuse remains unresolved, many survivors may be unable or unwilling to behave in a self-protective manner.

Zeirler et al. (1991, p.575) have indicated that safer sex messages “may be missing the point for people whose lives have been complicated by sexual victimization.” Survivors often find themselves in revictimizing relationships (Allers et al., 1993), and the threat of physical harm or the inability to negotiate safer sex due to low self-esteem and self-efficacy makes it difficult for them to insist on safer sex practices (S. Strathdee, personal communication, September 1996). This can lead to a lack of assertiveness on the part of survivors that is necessary in order to set appropriate limits on behaviors with their sexual partners (Allers & Benjack, 1991; Carmen & Reiker, 1989, Schilder & Kort, in press). It is often the case that sexual abuse survivors believe they have no rights at all (McBride & Markos, 1994), and this can become problematic in all manners of interpersonal relationships.

Homelessness has been identified as a factor associated with both childhood abuse and heightened vulnerability to HIV infection (Rotheram-Borus, Reid & Rosario, 1994); as a result, the problem faced by many survivors is literally one of survival.
Adolescents often leave home to escape an abusive situation, and then find themselves adopting high-risk survival strategies such as drug dealing and prostitution in order to adapt to street life (Carmen & Reiker, 1989). For some runaway survivors, the demands of present survival outweigh any threat of future HIV infection; for others, death from AIDS is viewed as a solution to their problems (Kaliski et al., 1990). In instances such as these, survivors may come to view HIV infection as an inevitable consequence of their situation or a form of passive suicide (S. Strathdee, personal communication, September, 1996). In the case of passive suicide, safer sex messages may be providing the information necessary for survivors to inflict self-harm (P. Crammond-Malkin, personal communication, November, 1996).

The prevalence of HIV infection among abuse survivors is not only due to the adoption of behaviors that place one at risk for HIV infection; HIV transmission may also occur as a direct consequence of the experience of sexual abuse (Gellert & Durfee, 1989; Gutman, 1993; Hammerschlag, 1993). Recent estimates suggest that it can take at least seven years for the HIV virus to manifest itself in the form of overt disease (Hendriks, Medley & Van Griensven, 1993; Operskalski, Stram, Lee, & Zhou, 1996), and this may contribute to the rates of HIV infection reported during adolescence and young adulthood. The fact that childhood sexual abuse is often repressed by the survivor and denied by the survivor’s family (Carmen & Reiker, 1989; Kaliski et al., 1990; McBride & Markos; 1994) makes it unlikely that an abused child will be tested for the virus. This is worrisome in light of the fact that adolescents in general, and survivors in particular, report inconsistent use of all contraceptive methods, including condoms (Allers &
Benjack, 1991; Allers et al., 1993; Carmen & Reiker, 1989; Kaliski et al., 1990; Rosenthal et al., 1994; Schilder & Kort, in press). As a result, survivors may be unknowingly infecting individuals who genuinely care for them, as well as those individuals who exploit them sexually. However, this is difficult to determine as other behaviors that place one at risk for HIV infection may also be manifest by this time, thus highlighting the need for timely assessment in childhood (S. Strathdee, personal communication, September, 1996).

Due to the abusive nature of their past relationships, survivors can be hesitant participants in any treatment process, and the problems they present are not necessarily obvious indicators of their history (Allers & Benjack, 1992; Carmen & Reiker, 1989; McBride & Markos, 1994). James (1989) suggests that survivors may be placing themselves in high-risk sexual situations in order to reenact the intensity of their early abuse experiences. According to Putnam (1990), these traumatic experiences are stored in a state-specific form, and can only be accessed if the individual is placed in that state again. Risk-taking behaviors—such as promiscuity and substance abuse—that survivors engage in as adults may be attempts to resolve abusive experiences of the past.

Risk-taking behaviors may also represent attempts to cope with difficulties that are currently experienced as a result of an abusive history. Salter (1995) suggests that drugs and alcohol may mimic the dissociative states brought on by the abuse. In other instances, self-harm may be inflicted to bring about a dissociative state or bring the individual back from one. Van der Kolk, Perry & Herman (1991) theorize that the opioids released during traumatic events may become addictive, causing the survivor to engage in risky behaviors that re-traumatize and bring about the further release of opioids.
Clearly, further research is required in this area. Characteristics of the survivor, the perpetrator and the abuse itself determine the manner in which the survivor understands and copes with his experience. The manner in which survivors understand and cope with their experiences of abuse can leave them more or less vulnerable to HIV infection and AIDS. If health care, psychological and social service professionals can better understand the experience of the survivor, they will be far more effective in their attempts to curtail the spread of the virus and alleviate the suffering of those individuals who are already infected. This is crucial, as HIV continues to spread at a time when existing health and social service resources are so limited, and the provision of future funds is likely to diminish. Recent estimates suggest that for each new HIV infection, $100,000 in direct medical costs and $600,000 in indirect costs such as lost productivity are incurred (Strathdee, Hogg, & Schechter, 1995). The cost in terms of human suffering is inestimable.
CHAPTER THREE

Purpose of the Study

Currently, untreated childhood abuse survivors likely comprise one of the largest groups of individuals who are at risk for HIV infection (Allers & Benjack, 1992), and gay men constitute the majority of males who report an abuse history (Cameron & Proctor, 1986; Cunningham et al., 1994; Johnson & Shrier, 1985; Schilder & Kort, in press; Veiel, unpublished). In addition, gay men who are already HIV-seropositive find it far more difficult to make empowered health decisions if they have a history of abuse (Schilder & Kort, in press). Existing research suggests that survivors of abuse may not benefit from “safer” sex campaigns to a satisfactory extent. It is unreasonable to assume that an individual who has never experienced safety in his own life would be able to understand “safer” sex messages or share a definition of safety with a world that has caused him so much harm. It behooves us as counsellors and therapists to understand the manner in which gay men abused as children find safety in their worlds, and to expend every effort to empower these individuals to make their worlds safer.

In order to understand the experiences of these men, and formulate therapeutic strategies that may assist them, the question asked in this research is “How do gay men living with HIV/AIDS define and experience safety in their lives after being sexually abused as children?” The question, as it is structured, illustrates the complexity and variability of the experience of safety in the lives of HIV-positive gay men. Use of the term “how” denotes the multiplicity of experiences and descriptions that have come to
constitute safety in the lives of these men. "Living" suggests that HIV/AIDS exists on a continuum, encompassing both health and illness. Safety evokes the manner in which gay men exist in and relate to their worlds. The terms "define" and "experience" are included in the research question in order to acknowledge the fact that the manner in which one experiences safety does not necessarily comply with the manner in which safety is commonly defined.

The distinction between experience and definition is relevant within the context of the current investigation in that preventive educational efforts often assume that the same language is spoken by all, and psychosocial service providers often assume that the experiences of their clients are identical. According to van Mannen (1990, p. 7), "we need to be reminded that in our desire to find out what is effective (from an experimental research point of view), we tend to forget that the change we aim for may have different significance for different persons." In order to maximize the utililization of limited medical and social resources, and extend the potential of human life, individuals must be seen as distinctive, and the uniqueness of their experience appreciated. Only then can we begin to tailor existing interventions and therapies, and by doing so develop new models of prevention and psychosocial intervention that will more effectively address the issues of HIV prevention and living with HIV/AIDS.

Research Design and Methodology

Popular opinion suggests that the best way to find things out about people is to ask them (e.g., Brenner, Brown & Canter, 1985; Nathan, 1986). The simplicity of this
commonsense notion is deceptive in that it belies the complexity of the communication process and the manner in which meaning is extracted from it. Who is doing the asking and how it is being asked are as important as what is being asked. These are all factors that contribute to the selection of persons to be questioned, the manner in which answers are given and the content of those answers. By finding out how to ask, we are in a better position to find out about other people and by doing so discover more about ourselves.

To date, most of the research regarding the relationship between childhood abuse and HIV infection has relied on self-completed questionnaire surveys in order to obtain data. While this method is very efficient in terms of researcher time and effort, there are difficulties with this type of inquiry. As Robson (1993, p.243) points out, "the data are, necessarily superficial." This makes analysis of the data very easy, but interpretation of the data quite problematic. It is difficult to determine the meaning of a particular question for a respondent, and this makes it even more difficult to determine the meaning intended by a particular response.

A qualitative approach has been chosen as the method most appropriate to obtain as much detailed information as possible regarding the experiences of gay men who were sexually abused as children and are now living with HIV/AIDS. As Guba and Lincoln (1994, p. 106) point out,

Human behavior, unlike that of physical objects, cannot be understood without reference to the meanings and purposes attached by human actors to their activities. Qualitative data, it is asserted, can provide rich insight into human behavior.
The qualitative approach affords the researcher an opportunity to derive “context imbedded meanings, acknowledgment of the contributions of observer and observed, utilization of tacit knowledge, and preference for interactive modes of knowledge construction” (Hoshmand, 1994, p. 27). This approach contrasts and complements the quantitative or experimental approach. The quantitative approach attempts to predict, control and explain behavior, whereas the qualitative approach attempts to portray human experience through description.

Due to the sensitive nature of the subject matter in question, and the range of responses this form of inquiry may elicit, a face-to-face interview format is utilized as the most effective method of data collection. As Merton, Fisk & Kendall (1990, p. 13) point out, “one of the principal reasons for the use of interviews rather than standard questionnaires is to uncover the diversity of relevant responses, whether or not these have been anticipated by the inquirer.” According to Robson (1993, p. 229) “face-to-face interviews offer the possibility of modifying one’s line of inquiry, following up interesting responses and investigating underlying motives in a way that self-administered questionnaires cannot.” Non-verbal cues can be considered in the interpretation of the data, and the availability of emotional support can assist respondents to participate in areas of inquiry that might otherwise prove to be too difficult for them to engage in on their own. This will assist in the elimination of uncertainty regarding intended meaning in the interview process, and will allow for the evaluation of the emotional impact of experiences.

It is the opportunity for both parties in the interview process to explore the meaning of the questions and answers involved that affords the interview its central value.
as a research procedure (Brenner et al., 1985). However, Mishler (1986, p.120) calls attention to the fact that

The standard interview through both its form and hierarchic structure of the interviewee-interviewer relationship tends to obscure relations between events and experiences and to disrupt individuals’ attempts to make coherent sense of what is happening to them and around them.

This control that the interviewer maintains in the standard interviewee-interviewer relationship suggests that the researcher’s way of looking at things is more important than the respondent’s view of events (Tagg, 1985). In this standard approach, what is uncovered is often the respondent’s opinion of what is on the interviewer’s mind rather than what is on the respondent’s mind (Merton et al., 1990). In addition, data which might otherwise be missed are more likely to be produced in open-ended, minimally structured interviews (Osborne, 1990).

In Robson’s (1993) consideration of interview methods, standard or structured interview methods are referred to as respondent interviews and nonstandard nondirective interviews are referred to as informant interviews. In the former, the interviewer remains in control throughout the entire interview process, whereas in the latter, the interviewee’s perceptions within a particular situation or context are considered most important. In Mishler’s (1986, p.24) view of respondent interviews, he observes that

The one shot interview conducted by the interviewer without local knowledge of a respondent’s life situation and following a standard schedule that explicitly excludes attention to particular circumstances—in short, a meeting between strangers unfamiliar with each other’s “socially
organized texts” of meaning--does not provide the necessary contextual basis for adequate interpretation.

Conversely, in their assessment of informer interviews, Fontana & Frey (1994, P.366) point out that such an approach is used “in an attempt to understand complex behavior of members of society without imposing any apriori categorization that may limit the field of inquiry.” This allows informants to place their responses in the proper context rather than a framework that is considered appropriate by the interviewer (Merton, 1990). As a result, interpretation of the interview is far more accurate, thereby increasing the utility of the interview.

The cooperative nature of the interview technique employed in this investigation is expressed in the informants’ roles as co-researchers (Osborne, 1990). As indicated in the preceding literature review, HIV-seropositive gay males are likely to have suffered abuse and oppression in their lives, and their participation as equals with the researcher in this investigation is an empowering experience. Trust and respect are necessary components of equality, and the presence of these components in this research contribute to the integrity and richness of the co-researchers’ stories. I have expended every effort to ensure that the trust and respect of co-researchers is warranted.

The uses that an interview may have vary with the role and aim of the researcher and informant. According to Mishler (1986, p.132),

Yielding control to interviewees of the flow and content of the interview, entering into a collaborative relationship, attending to what and how interviewees may learn from their efforts to respond meaningfully to questions within the context of their own worlds of experience, giving
them a voice in the interpretation and use of findings, serving as advocates
of their interests—all these “research methods” radically alter the standard
definition of the researcher’s role and aims.

Such an approach produces a text-oriented research product that is biographical in nature,
and this can be a powerful instrument for insight and social change (Tagg, 1985). To this
end, a semistructured interview schedule (see Appendix A) has been developed for the
current investigation, in which co-researchers are given as much control as possible in the
interview process, while the author keeps the conversation focused on the area of interest
or concern.

Six main areas of interest which are pertinent to the current investigation are
included in the interview schedule, although these are not intended to be considered
inclusively or exclusively. These include family history, behavioral history, health
history, sexual history, abuse history and safety history. Each of these areas is to be
considered a guiding principle rather than a categorical construct. The informant
determines the relevance of the area of interest and what is to be included in that area. For
example, if substance abuse is discussed, it might be included in any or all of the areas of
interest, depending on the co-researcher’s context.

As much as possible the co-researcher will direct the flow and content of the
interview. According to Fontana & Frey (1994, p. 371),

This makes the interview more honest, morally sound, and reliable
because it treats the respondent as an equal, allows him or her to express
personal feelings, and therefore presents a more “realistic” picture than
can be uncovered using traditional interview methods.
I only intercede in the direction of the interview if requested to do so by the co-researcher; otherwise, the author's function is to keep the interview focused on the general area of concern in order to obtain as rich and detailed an account as possible. This is accomplished with the sensitive and judicious use of probes (see Appendix A). The reader should keep in mind that the interview schedule found in Appendix A is simply a guideline, and was used with the greatest degree of flexibility possible in order to extract a textually rich and meaningful account of the co-researchers' experiences.

van Manen (1990, p.45) observes that "in our efforts to make sense of our lived experiences with theories and hypothesizing frameworks we are forgetting that it is living human beings who bring schemata and frameworks into being and not the reverse." If experience as it is conceptualized becomes paramount, it is removed from experience as it is lived and described. It is exceedingly difficult, if not impossible, to determine why a phenomenon occurs if it remains to be determined what that phenomenon is. In order to address this issue, a phenomenological research methodology using thematic analysis is employed in this investigation.

The empirical phenomenological approach involves a return to experience in order to obtain comprehensive descriptions that provide the basis for a reflexive structural analysis that portrays the essences of experience (Moustakas, 1994, p. 13). The phenomenological approach attempts to derive the meaning of experiences from descriptions of them. Evidence consists of first person accounts of lived experience. According to van Manen (1990, p.17),

In quantitative sciences precision and exactness are usually seen to be indications of refinement of measurement and perfection of research
design. In contrast, [phenomenological methodology] strives for precision and exactness by aiming for interpretive descriptions that exact fullness and completeness of detail, and that explore to a degree of perfection the fundamental nature of the notion being addressed in the text.

Phenomenological research is valid to the extent that the descriptions of experience allow meaning and understanding to be derived as completely as possible from them.

In phenomenological research the focus rests on the qualities of the experience, and the challenge resides in determining the full nature and meaning of that experience (Moustakas, 1994). A distinction exists in phenomenological methodology between the appearance of the phenomenon and the essence of that phenomenon. Phenomenological research consists of reflectively bringing into focus that which tends to be obscure, that which tends to evade the intelligibility of our natural attitude to everyday life (van Manen, 1990, p. 32). A “natural attitude” to everyday life is often directed by presuppositions, and these presuppositions foster predilections that determine the nature of phenomena to be brought into awareness and the meaning that is attributed to those phenomena.

In order to appreciate fully the nature and meaning of the experience being researched, it becomes necessary to identify presuppositions, and make explicit the beliefs, biases, assumptions and theories on which understanding is based (Moustakas, 1994; van Manen, 1990). This procedure is known as “bracketing,” and it is an essential component of the research process. Bracketing ensures that the research topic and question remain the focal point of the investigation. As van Manen (1990, p.46) observes,
The problem of phenomenological inquiry is not always that we know too little about the phenomenon to investigate, but that we know too much. Or, more accurately, the problem is that “common sense” preunderstandings, our suppositions, assumptions, and the existing bodies of scientific knowledge, predispose us to interpret the nature of phenomena before we have even come to grips with the significance of the phenomenological question.

The focus of the research is intensified if biases are acknowledged, and new dialogue is likely to be generated when the researcher and co-researchers reconsider these biases.

The attention and reconsideration afforded to accounts of experience in the phenomenological approach bring to the fore thematic components that might have otherwise been unnoticed or undervalued. In order to come to grips with the structure of meaning of the text, it is helpful to think of the phenomenon described in the text as approachable in terms of meaning units, structures of meaning or themes (van Manen, 1990, p.78). Upon completion of the initial interview, the author examined the interview transcription in an attempt to identify underlying meaning units or themes.

Once thematic components were extracted from the text and verified by the researcher and co-researcher, they were used to develop textural descriptions of the experience (Moustakas, 1994). Textural descriptions are integrated structurally in order to construct the universal quality or essence of the phenomena being examined by the research question.

In order to determine the universal as well as particular qualities of safety in the lives of HIV-seropositive gay men with histories of childhood sexual abuse, a multiple
case study design is utilized in this investigation. Robson (1993, p.146) describes a case study as “a strategy for doing research which involves an empirical investigation of a particular contemporary phenomena within its real life context using multiple sources of evidence.” The utilization of a multiple case study design in this investigation allows both general and specific observations to be made within the context of the field of inquiry.

Methods and Procedures

In order to capture the significance of context within the descriptions provided by co-researchers the following procedures, which are outlined by Moustakas (1994), were used to collect, organize and analyze the data:

1. Using a phenomenological approach, obtain a full description of the co-researcher’s experience of the phenomenon.

2. From the verbatim transcript of the co-researcher’s experience complete the following steps:
   a. Consider each statement with respect to significance for description of the experience.
   b. Record all relevant statements.
   c. List each nonrepetitive, non-overlapping statement. These are the invariant horizons or meaning units of the experience. They point to the unique qualities of an experience; those that stand out.
   d. Relate and cluster invariant meaning units into themes.
   e. Synthesize the invariant meaning units or themes into a description of the textures of experience. Include verbatim examples.
f. Reflect on the textural description. Through reflection and analysis, construct a description of the structures of the co-researcher’s experience. This provides a vivid account of the underlying dynamics of the experience. It identifies the themes and qualities that account for how thoughts and feelings connected with the phenomenon are aroused, and what conditions evoke the phenomenon.

g. Construct a textural-structural description of the meanings and essences of the co-researcher’s experience.

3. From the verbatim transcript of the experiences of each of the other co-researchers, complete the above steps, a through g.

4. From the individual textural-structural descriptions of all co-researchers’ experiences, construct a composite textural-structural description of the meanings and essences of the experience, integrating all individual textural-structural descriptions into a universal description of the experience representing the group as a whole.

Selection of co-researchers

Given the sensitive nature of the research question, it was necessary to recruit co-researchers who were willing and able to withstand the emotional demands an interview such as this might present. In order to ensure that the interviews were able to capture as rich a description as possible, it was very important to recruit co-researchers who had established a level of rapport with me that was sufficient for them to convey comfortably very personal details of their lives. With these constraints in mind, I informed clients that had been engaged in long-term therapeutic relationships with me through agencies such as AIDS Vancouver, the Friends for Life Society and The Street Project Counselling
Services of the research I was about to undertake in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the Master of Arts degree in Counselling Psychology. Three clients expressed an interest in participating in the research, as it seemed to pertain directly to their lives. They all felt it was extremely important that their story be heard and became co-researchers in this investigation.

Each of these men identified himself as a gay, HIV-seropositive survivor of childhood sexual abuse. Respectively, their pseudonyms are Allan, Brent and Carl. I have engaged in individual and group therapy with Allan and Carl in a number of agencies and continue to do so through The Street Project Counselling Services. Brent and I had engaged in individual therapy and couples therapy with his partner. Brent currently resides in San Francisco, and he occasionally “touches base” with me via telephone.

Due to the depth and ongoing nature of the therapeutic relationship I have had or continue to have with each of these men, it was necessary to clearly differentiate the roles of therapist, researcher, client and co-researcher. Each of the co-researchers was informed that the interviews were intended as exercises in data collection, with the stories they told being the primary source of data. My role during the interview was primarily focus oriented in an attempt to derive as rich and detailed a description of events as possible. The role of the co-researchers was to provide any description of the events in their lives that they considered relevant to the research question. Any therapeutic treatment of the material in question was reserved for therapy sessions when they assumed their role as clients and I as therapist.

The task of separating our roles, while seemingly straightforward, presented some degree of difficulty when the interviews were actually being conducted. As is apparent in
the transcripts of the interviews, recounting life events was at times emotionally taxing on co-researchers. Their expectancy of me as their therapist, and my inclination to respond accordingly proved to be distracting at times. In those instances, the delineation of our roles became less clear.
CHAPTER FOUR

Data Collection and Analysis

Each of the co-researchers was scheduled to meet with me individually to conduct an initial interview of approximately ninety minutes in duration. Co-researchers decided on the duration of their interviews, depending on the amount of time that they deemed necessary to convey all relevant information. A factor also contributing to the duration of the initial interview was the emotional toll these stories exacted from the co-researchers, and their ability to continue.

The duration of Allan’s interview was one hundred minutes, and determined to some extent by the emotional demands the telling of his story placed on him. Carl’s interview was also one hundred minutes, but its termination was determined primarily by the content Carl considered relevant. Brent’s interview, although emotionally demanding on him, took one hundred eighty minutes to complete. All co-researchers reported that they found the interview process rewarding.

Each interview was recorded on cassette tape(s) and subsequently transcribed by the author. Using the Folio 4 software package, the researcher manually assigned meaning units to each statement or portion thereof that was contained in each co-researcher’s narrative. The Folio 4 software package, although intended for other purposes, lent itself very well to the qualitative analysis of the data reported. With the use of the Folio 4 highlighter feature, meaning units could be ascribed to any portion of the transcript text, and colour-coded for easy identification and text retrieval. These meaning
units were later collapsed into thematic constructs. Common themes as well as thematic differences were identified across the co-researchers' narratives.

All co-researchers were provided with a complete transcript of their initial interview without its representation in meaning units. This enabled the co-researchers to each reflect on the content and meaning of his own interview without being contaminated by my influence. A period of nine months transpired between the time co-researchers were provided with a copy of their interview transcript and the time they were provided with the researcher's thematic analysis of their narrative.

This time frame allowed the author to analyze the narratives thematically, and co-researchers to review their interviews at their own pace. Brent reviewed his transcript immediately upon its receipt. Allan and Carl chose to progress slowly as they reflected on their interviews, with each taking periods of up to eight weeks between sections of their transcript as they worked their way through their narratives. The co-researchers were then provided with thematic interpretations of their interviews and asked to verify that the interpretations captured their experiences. They were also invited to provide additional commentary that could enhance the descriptive capacity of the thematic interpretations.

The co-researchers all reported that they found this experience to be very rewarding. They were appreciative of the efforts expended by the author to ensure that their stories were heard and understood. The co-researchers found that the thematic analysis of their interviews served to focus and clarify the issues that they were addressing in therapy. They continue to refer to the thematic analysis of their narratives as they progress through the therapeutic relationship they maintain with the author.
Ethical Considerations

Co-researchers were recruited through *The Pacific AIDS Resource Centre* and *Friends for Life Society*. At the time of recruitment, I was a volunteer therapist at both of these agencies, and was engaged in a therapeutic relationship with the clients who chose to participate as co-researchers in this investigation. Their participation in this research was voluntary, and did not in any way impact the services they received from *The Pacific AIDS Resource Centre, The Friends for Life Society* or *The Street Project Counselling Services* where the author is currently employed. Co-researchers were informed that they could terminate their participation in this research at any time without affecting the therapeutic relationship we had built together. They were required to sign consent forms prior to their involvement with this research. Their identities were kept anonymous, and all taped materials were confidential.

Due to the sensitive nature of the information being disclosed in this research, ongoing support and counselling was offered to co-researchers. As indicated by Osborne (1990, p. 84) “the co-researcher may require continued attention in order to resolve any personal difficulties which may have become more conscious as a result of data collection.” Co-researcher reviews of interpretations provided them with an opportunity to explore their reactions to the investigation with the researcher. In addition, all co-researchers had accessed counselling services with me or other therapists prior to their participation in this research, and this was made available to them on an ongoing and no-cost basis through *The Pacific AIDS Resource Centre, The Friends for Life Society* or *The Street Project Counselling Services*
While the lived experience of each of these men is unique, a number of common themes emerged through data analysis. Before addressing these themes, some background information on each of these men is provided as an additional contextual reference. In order to protect the anonymity of co-researchers, pseudonyms are used throughout, and specific details of their lives are left intentionally vague.

Allan, Brent and Carl are all Caucasian men in their mid-to-late thirties. They have all tested positive for HIV; this has occurred within the last eight to thirteen years. These three men remain in relatively good health, and continue to be free of any symptoms indicative of the opportunistic infections associated with HIV. At the time of writing, none of the co-researchers is being treated pharmacologically for HIV infection, although Brent was on anti-retroviral therapy several years ago and suffered from many of the medications’ side effects.

At the time of writing, Brent is collecting disability benefits and volunteering his time to various organizations serving HIV-positive communities, while Allan and Carl pursue their career aspirations with full-time and part-time employment respectively. Brent has been contemplating a return to work, but has not done so as of yet. Allan and Carl have no intention of leaving their occupations at this time.
Each of the co-researchers reports varying degrees of historical trauma. All three men were witness to domestic violence, and to a greater or lesser extent this violence was directed towards them. While this has undoubtedly had some impact on them, all three men report that their experience of sexual abuse—as varied as it is—has been the factor most influential in their development and current state of being.

Categorically, the definition of sexual abuse has proven to be problematic in the research literature (e.g., Finklehor, Araji, Baron, Browne, Peters & Wyatt, 1986). While definitions vary widely, the experiences of the co-researchers in this study suggest that sexual abuse is any sexual activity occurring during childhood that was instigated by another party without the co-researchers’ consent or understanding. In Allan’s case, sexual abuse was perpetrated by an individual outside of the family who was perceived by him to be much more his senior. Brent’s perpetrators were not members of his immediate family and were closer to his age chronologically. An immediate and older member of Carl’s family abused him sexually. Allan and Carl continue their long-term therapeutic involvement with the author in both individual and group settings. Brent has been involved therapeutically in both individual and couples counselling with the author. He has since relocated to San Francisco, but occasionally “touches base” via telephone.

As indicated in the following narratives, the co-researchers have encountered a formidable degree of resistance and denial when attempting to tell their story and have their experiences validated. This has served to disempower the co-researchers, and act as a barrier to a resolution of their experiences. In order to ensure that the co-researchers participation in this research is an empowering experience, thematic analysis is first
presented in the co-researchers' own words. Thematic analysis is then presented with the author's reflections on what was said. These are their stories.

Co-researcher's Narratives

The Endurance of Alienation

Allan's Story

It just seemed like my parents were kind of very preoccupied I guess with problems in their life and things like that. Um, and also, my mother already had four kids before I was born and they were, you know, um, from nine years old up to being teenagers. And I think that when I came along it was um, you know, I don't think I was a wanted child. Um, after I was born I'm sure I was a wanted child, but um, I don't think my mother was looking forward to starting out with another child after her other children were almost you know, half-way towards growing up.

[I'm amazed at] how dysfunctional [my family] was and how I really had no net. I had no one around me that could help me out of it you know, and how screwed up my childhood was you know, particularly before my parents divorced. Um you know like I mean dad made good money at that time and I remember my mom digging through my dad’s pockets for change for groceries and things for us, you know cause I guess my dad was spending his money on you know, booze and parties...to the neglect of the family. And then it continued with my parents you know even though it was more of a, you
know, more discipline and more um, um, consistency after that, you know. Um, you
know and just realizing there was no one at home or anyone in my life that I could
depend on but myself pretty much, you know through all my life.

Um it was really difficult for me because, um, my parents separated and I ended
up staying with my mom in California, um for a year. Uh, school was very hard for me. I
think um, like I don’t have a lot of memory of like my school in California before about
the age of nine. Um, and I think it was, you know, I think I had more friends and stuff.
then from what I remember, but school and coming to Canada, I was automatically very
different from other children. And I think I um, I don’t know I probably had some
problems too. I, I didn’t fit in well. I was even teased about being gay by about the age of
nine by the other kids. They could tell that I was different.

Yeah, I was feeling like a real outsider. Um, I think I knew I was different, but I
didn’t feel like I was that different from other children. Um, [I was] really feeling like an
outsider and uncared about. Like no one really cared what happened with my life or, or
about me. (big pause). Also during this time my dad wouldn’t allow me to have any
contact with my mother whatsoever, as far as phone calls, letters or anything. So I was
like basically totally cut off from my mother. Um, I always felt like if she really cared for
me she would settle down and um, make a home for me. And she didn’t.

Yeah, [I felt] very abandoned. Very you know like um, you know I guess if she
really did care for me um, she would have left “G.” who was you know basically my
stepfather, because you know, they were together for years and years, and uh they
weren’t married. Um, [I hoped they would] make a home for me. But yeah I did, I felt
like rejection, abandonment, um, you know like um that she didn’t care enough, you
know. Ah, my mother wasn’t really stable enough to be there for me a lot. I don’t think, you know like she had so many problems that she was dealing with and my dad was very abusive to my mother so I think that kinda made her um, you know, not like strong enough to really give a lot of support to me.

You know, um, but uh, I mean by the time, this is really funny; it’s not funny it’s actually quite sick but when I was about eight or nine years old my stepmother tried to have me declared a “suppressive” person in the church, because she thought that I was very suppressive. To them a suppressive person is someone who is like a bad person or you know kind of evil. That was uh, I was inherently bad, you know. And a lot of times you know, I do think I wasn’t necessarily bad but she’d think that I had the most evil motives behind them. You know, things like that.

I’ve never been able to really talk to my father. You know, um, in a realistic conversation. [My stepmother would] always take his side with anything--always find that he was right. Um, and so I don’t know, and [they had] a lot of rules. And I don’t know, for some reason it kind of fosters for them working together or you know, she’d always stand up behind my dad, pretty much for everything. There was no one I could really rely on or um, or um tell what was going on, cause they wouldn’t believe me and he’d just say oh he’s a big baby or he’s making it up or he’s lying. You know. And everyone else has felt that I needed discipline anyway, cause I was such a bad child that you know, anything that did happen to me bad was good because I was a spoiled, rotten brat who got anything I wanted.

I was passed off to anyone they could. And um, I was passed off to “J.” a lot. He was like my baby sitter. I can’t believe my parents didn’t find it strange, you know I, that
uh, he would take me and stuff and you know take care of me. You know, like I was out with him all the time. He'd be the only one around pretty much. He was, you know, like my companion that I hung out with. You know, um, and uh, you know so there was a lot. I kind of believed, well you know “J.”— at least somebody—likes me and pays attention to me. It you know made me feel like well at least I guess there must be something ok about me, someone's paying attention to me. And that he wouldn't be my friend anymore, we wouldn't hang out anymore if I didn’t do what I was told.

We ended up going for beers together [as adults] and um, at that time I didn’t have a lot of memory of the sex abuse that he did to me as a child. Um, and uh, I think a lot of times I would um, sometimes kinda not live in, you know I put I’d blank a lot of things out. I think that’s probably why I don’t remember a lot of my childhood. I just wouldn’t look at it. But the only reason I remember [the sexual abuse] is because I had a flashback. The flashback occurred, oh when I was around twenty-six. That would have been about five years ago. Yeah it would have been about five years ago. Um, one, one flashback, and uh, and it was him taking pictures of me, telling me that I was going to be a movie star and you know, and stuff like that. And um, um leading me on for pictures. And um, and then after the flashback the memory of [the abuse] immediately came back to me.

I had a lot of suicide attempts and stuff when I was younger too, and you know it’s something that I wouldn’t repeat now, but I think I’ve said pretty much everything, yeah. I started attempting suicide when I was about um, probably about thirteen and I did it when I was thirteen, probably around fifteen and then around nineteen. So there were three or four attempts and that but um, it’s not something that I would continue. I think if,
you know something terrible happened where I’d need some, you know one to rely on, I
don’t think there really is anyone, you know. Knowing that, you know, what if I got sick;
there’s no one there for me. I mean, who’s gonna care for me. But there’s no one there
for me, type thing you know yeah.

Brent’s Story

Um, at six years old I was lost in a department store, and I was terrified. Just
major panic. My mother was always working. She started working when I was the age of
five. And uh, there was no supervision. Stuff where a parent should intervene. I was
always usually just left alone. Well, my life was so isolated from everybody else.
Um, the majority of my influences came from television.

Uh, my father liked to brag and boast all the time, and there was really nothing to
brag or boast about Brent. He was always there for my brother, but when it came time for
my turn for sports day, um school plays, you know, dad wasn’t there, he was working or
he was just off shift, and he was too tired. Yeah... and because I was introverted my
father—uh, I don’t know if because is the right word—um my father never taught me any
sports skills. He didn’t know what to do. Uh, my father had trained my brother in all
those skills, but hadn’t with me. And uh, I was always the last one to be picked for the
team. Nobody wanted me; they didn’t want me at school; they didn’t want me at home.

And myself, I was introverted, afraid of people, and uh, um, afraid to leave the
house. Um, my brother locked me out of the house when I was five years old.
And uh, I had nowhere to go. I didn’t want to go into the police station so I spent the whole day in the doghouse with the German shepherds--police dogs--until my parents came home. So I would just, I would introvert, go way deep inside, uh in an area where nobody could hurt me. I was in my own world.

And um, [my father is a closeted homosexual and] he’s got a little boy who’s growing up gay. Oh my God! Yeah, he asked me to go see a psychiatrist and uh that they could help me with it so that I could adjust. He was afraid to hold me. He was afraid to touch me. He was afraid to show any affection or warmth. He wouldn’t hug or hold me anymore.

Um, and it was about eight-thirty [one] night, because that was my bedtime, and I walked over to my mom and I kissed her goodnight, and I walked over to my dad to kiss him goodnight, because I always did, and uh, he pushed me away and said that boys don’t kiss men. Uh, that uh, from now on, I only get a handshake. And uh, he said goodnight and go to your room and uh, I just felt abandoned and pushed away, and that was sort of the end of whatever closeness I had with my father....As soon as I left it made things easy for my dad because he didn’t need to be around me

My parents were ritual drinkers. And uh every weekend uh they were uh the evening would usually end with them getting drunk or us staying over at somebody else’s house because they couldn’t drive home. When the adults were all together drinking, the kids could go off and do whatever they wanted to. So we, you know uh, there were basically no rules....the adults [would] sit ‘round the kitchen table drinking and playing cards and smoking cigarettes and um, there was music playing and lots of laughter, and uh, uh typical adult behavior in the sixties I guess (laughs). At least that’s what I thought
it was, with them getting drunk. My uncle later on, years later he died. He was an alcoholic, and he died in his own vomit.

I want[ed] mom, [years later] you know for this to be the best Christmas ever (tears). And uh, my dad’s drunk and his best friend is drunk and uh, his best friend went over and crawled onto the luggage carrousel that was going round and round in circles. He was just laughing away, dad’s laughing, and uh (pause) like I can’t believe what’s going on. And I get into the car and they’ve got two glasses of beer. He spills one of the glasses of beer on the seat; the car reeks of alcohol; he asks me to drive. So I drive home and get into the house and I’m already shocked by what’s gone on.

And I come up the stairs and my mother is holding on to the kitchen counter, um to keep herself from falling over. She can’t focus on me, um, her eyes are drifting off in different directions, and I’m like “hi mom,” and she’s looking at me trying to figure out who I am. It was just, it was (pause) I had to come over to her and I’m like “mom, it’s Brent.” And just little glimpses of recognizing what was going on were coming in to her.

[After I left home] my mother started to drink [heavily], and uh she had a heart valve problem; the doctor told her not to smoke or drink or uh, uh you know get plenty of exercise and eat properly and uh she took a self-destructive path as well. Um, and I really think that she died just because she wanted to, she really really wanted to. She was having a glass of wine at two-o’clock in the afternoon, she was watching her favorite soap opera [when she died].

That’s when I started to experiment with uh drugs. Just about any drugs. Um, cocaine, marijuana, acid, ecstasy, MDA. Um it wasn’t until uh, I guess maybe 1993 that I started experimenting with crystal and uh also a pharmaceutical delight of prescription
drugs, uh antidepressants, um Adivan and Clonazipam, Morazipan and uh, there was so many drugs.

I have to do drugs to have sex. And doing drugs took the pain away from the sex I was having. So we did more drugs, and more drugs, and more drugs. Yeah. And I met up with [a] chap after that who was heavily into crystal. Um, through the relationship we had smoked lots of marijuana, and uh, um some crystal meth, and he told me that he had experimented with heroine. And, um, um, I experimented with heroine with him, um on a couple of occasions. Um, using needles, and uh, that's something that I had thought about from the age of fourteen years old. Um, and uh, I didn't like the way heroine made me feel. And then he told me that um, he'd been addicted to heroine for the whole time of the relationship and had never quit. He'd been doing it on a daily basis.

I didn't want to um, not that the drugs were bad, but the behavior that I experienced while under the influence of drugs um, some people could do a little bit of crystal or one hit of Ecstasy and have the evening of their life, and talk about it all their life. Um, for me it was not doing a little bit of crystal; it was to see how much I could do. And uh, not one hit of Ecstasy, but two hits or three hits. My friends would do a quarter hit of acid and I would do five. (long pause) But uh, strangely enough whenever I did acid it would ground me and bring me back. That was the one saving grace.

Cocaine made me really mean, um paranoia. Um, crystal, extremely chatty. Um, cleaning the house, rearranging the furniture. Uh, very creative, whole new ideas uh, (pause) and then after being up for twenty-four or thirty-six hours, um the whole environment would change from dancing, rearranging, cleaning to having fun to uh sexual monster. If I [overdosed] it didn't matter anyways.
And another hard part about all of this too is that uh, I originally in about 1993, when I introduced psychedelics to a group of friends that I had, we playfully experimented and had lots of fun. I’ve left that and I’m not into doing that stuff anymore. I know I’ll definitely, I’ll do acid again; I’ll do again magic mushrooms again; I’ll do ecstasy again; I’ll do crystal again. For some people it’s uh, it seems to be uh smoking a joint. Um, other people, as soon as it’s Friday night, um, they’ve bought crystal. Users, or habitual users, they’re uh there’s no difference between my father coming home and having his glass of rye.

But there’s a sense of loneliness and isolation. I’m living alone for the first time in ten years. Um, maybe as a child with all those years of not being wanted on a team, being the last one picked all the time, that if anybody picked me in my adulthood--adult years--uh it was rewarding. If anyone wanted to sleep with me, it was rewarding. If anybody wanted me it was rewarding. But that was better than no contact, no touch, no...(pause). Just the fact that somebody wanted me.

And uh, from about nineteen--um- nineteen-sixty-eight um, was the first year that I contemplated suicide. I was eight years old. Um, I remember picking up an, um carving knife in the kitchen and looking at it and just wondering where I would push it through, where my heart was and stuff. And uh, so I was gathering information at that age so that if I wanted to do it, how would I do it. I could never had done anything to take my life while [my mother] was alive. So as I mentioned earlier, that ruled out any form of suicide I had no empowerment at all on how to take my life.

Um, I mean living in Victoria we had high tourism, um a lot of Americans coming up, and by 1983 I’d started to hear about uh, the gay plague that was going
around and uh, uh I thought it was actually quite interesting. I thought “wow, there’s a disease out there that’s killing gay people. Great!” Yeah. I thought yeah, it felt just like I had finished elementary school and all I had left now was high school, and I was done and I could get off this planet. Um...Yeah, it was like winning the lottery. When I got the news [that I was HIV-positive]--the results--I was happy. Like, let’s get off this planet.

Carl’s Story

Um, I never was viewed as attractive at all; I was always very, very heavy. So, I was always the fat kid, always um, cast aside in a way. You know, calling me names or whatever. I was always sort of outcast that way. Yeah, yeah, yeah when I look at it there's quite a lot about that in my history, feeling abandoned. It just seems to be a recurring issue that's come up tonight and I'm sort of revisiting, the issue of abandonment.

It's interesting. I, I, the reason I'm concurring with you is because um, I had a very in depth discussion about this last night with a friend of mine who's having a problem with a relationship he's in. And [he] admitted that his biggest fear is abandonment and he's having a difficult time with a relationship where she can't commit to him and she's acting out sexually with other people. Yet all, all at the same time admitting that she loves him deeply. So he seems to be caught between what she's doing. So it's just ah, abandonment is an issue that's in my mind and now that I think, having thought about it last night, I can understand it tonight, talking about the broad scheme of my life and seeing it as a recurring theme.
Um when I was, well no this happened earlier than that um, well I can't say ah (laughing) around seven, around eight, but I remember it specifically when I was eight [my mother] started working. Um, so I remember feeling a great sense of loss from her, ah, when she started working. I remember when I was, I remember when I was in grade three I remember looking up at the clock at ten to three and knowing that she was leaving for work and that when I got home she wouldn't be there. I remember feeling that loss then.

Um, it wouldn't always be horrible when I'd go home after school but I remember being very aware of that at some points, looking up at the clock and knowing and feeling (pause) I don't know, a sense of loss. I was gonna say, it wasn't really a feeling of not being safe or of danger but just a loss, a feeling of loss. Well, I knew what she was, that she sort of was doing what she wanted or needed to do but yeah I suppose there is a level of that because I came home and it was like I didn't have the company that I had....yeah, I suppose I felt, I don't know, just sort of empty I suppose.

Um, (laughing) my father, I can think of one very strange incident and it was again a feeling of, it was at a point where he was, I viewed him as the enemy, as the rest of the family did. [After a particularly violent argument between my parents] I remember my mom saying at one point, "do you see what you're doing to him?" And he, I don't, I guess he paid me no regard or what, I don't know what. I don't remember exactly what state he was in. Um, until that point, um actually that's probably what was the beginning of the downfall. The dynamic changed later, but it was difficult with him because of the fact that when [my parents] stopped communicating he stopped being our father really,
um he lived his own life and we were very separate from that. He would work and he
would come home late um and just go to his room to go to bed.

Um, we didn't see him that much. Um, I suppose, there was a part of him felt that
we were turned against him in a way, but I mean part of it was of his own accord as well,
for me to disrespect and to reject him. I think that's probably what he was hurt by the
most, the way um, he lost us is that there wasn't the respect for him and we were sort of
removed from him. Uh, that's what he felt anyway. But I mean, at least that's what I
found out later, how he sort of felt about that.

So he would talk and I would be really sort of, smarmy or surly with him, to the
point where he made a big point of it and just sort of said, look, what, you know.
He ah, at the same point, he really didn't do anything to rectify that. So, you know, I
mean, yes maybe it wasn't ideal but, and maybe he didn't feel that he was sort of, that we
were taken away from him in a way. But he certainly didn't make any steps to bring us
closer either. Not in a huge way.

Um, my eldest brother was very quiet, very reserved and generally wasn't a part
of that. I remember there was a point for him that during my childhood he really avoided
me because he hated dealing with me as a child. During those early adolescence years, he
just found it really annoying and just would refuse to deal with me. [My other brother]
would always feel that he was being treated unfairly but more often than not he would
instigate the problem and he was five years older than me and should know better
anyway. So ah, so yeah the, I mean I am, he and I don't have much in common with our
lives anyway.
Um, there's certainly a lack of respect [between my other brother and I] because of [his sexual abuse of me]. Um, because he's always sort of, not respected me in what I do, or at least I don't, I never hear that. Most, most anything I hear from him is always criticism, always. Everything, everything that comes from him is really criticism. Um, very, very, very far and few between have there been the incidents where he's praised me for anything.

Um, I suppose in ways he's, he takes it personally that (pause) he takes it as a knock against him, that I've done something better than he, or whatever. But I mean it's probably, he's probably a little fearful of me too because he knows that there have been times when I've looked down my nose at his way of life too. Because I feel like he's (laughing), just a redneck that really doesn't aspire to very much in life, that has really done very little with his life. So I know that we both judge each other very heavily within our own framework. So as much as he judges me for things, with, from his perspective, I do the same to him.

It wasn't as if he would come to me and say, "you want to go somewhere, or whatever." Although that might have happened on occasion. There might have been times when he was going out, doing his own thing with his friends and that he didn't want me hanging around. But that didn't happen really often. It's just funny. It's just like I'm just remembering that now, being hurt by that and, or on a couple of incidences. So again, it's more abandonment.

Um, he wouldn't, there was, there was a period where I used to hang out with him and his friends; he would drag me along and stuff. After [he sexually abused me], that
stopped...at some point [sex] became very wrong to do and he denied it of me. My brother thought that it was wrong and that he did not want to be touched anymore. (long pause). I suppose I was confused by it all but I think I was hurt by it in a way, because I couldn't understand why all of a sudden it was wrong. And it was like a toy that had been taken away from me, because it was this fun, secretive thing we did together and all of a sudden it was wrong to do and I was not permitted to do it anymore. (Pause) So that bothered me (long pause). So I was abandoned by him then, because, I did...need the truth.

But [sex] was something that I felt compelled to do and I could not refuse once I made the decision. I suppose maybe in a way, in, in an off-handed way maybe I'm trying to punish myself or something, or something. In ways, it's odd, but I, I know that there have been a few times where even when I'm engaging in the sex and I know I'm not having a good time and I know I'm repulsed I can't stop and I can't say no. Can't stop and say, "I'm not having a good time. Why am I doing this?" Maybe because they will abandon me. I suppose that must be what it is, but there, I suppose yeah, like I guess that's got to be the heart of it, because it's not really pleasing me....I suppose yeah, like I guess that's got to be the heart of it because I mean, it's not really pleasing me.

Maybe in the beginning the prospect makes me think that it will please me but then I come to an awareness of that, knowing that it's not going to. Yet I do feel like I need to please that person. I suppose that comes back to a feeling of, of almost abandonment again in a way. I had ongoing sex with my best friend when I was, well after these incidents happened with my brother I suppose, about, I don't know how long after that. He and I had ongoing sex from the point where I was probably ten, until I was
thirteen or fourteen. Um, and we would have ongoing sex, yet more often that not he would be satisfied and I would not because he would ejaculate faster than I would. So he, after he ejaculated he wasn't interested in, in bringing me to climax.

The Deprecation of Self:

Allan's Story

But, I mean I didn’t feel like I was that different from other children. You know, I mean, I wasn’t. I didn’t think I was that different. But I did know I was. I did have a feeling of being kinda different, you know. A lot of the time I think I would just live in a fantasy world; a fantasy world that I created. You know the fact that my parents were, my father and my stepmother were in the church of Scientology. They kind of live in a fantasy world too. So it wasn’t um (laughter) that different, you know um, from I guess what their life was like.

You know and I mean like they’ve been in like the Church of Scientology since I was, well my dad’s been in since I was about seven or eight. And um, my stepmom has been in it since I’ve known her. And um, they’ve got a lot of really wacky ideas. So, and I think I realized how crazy their ideas were, they’re even crazier now that I’m an adult. Just realizing how, even then I knew that a lot of their ideas were just ridiculous. Just um, didn’t make sense. Um, and um, uh you know, but a lot of times I wouldn’t have any choice. I would have to go along with it--with their ideas and that because I was under them.
A lot of times I felt that I was the parent and they were the children. You know (laughs). Um, because a lot of times it seemed like I dealt on more of a mature level than they did. That I knew that the things that they were taught by the church weren’t realistic. That it wasn’t real. That it was um, that it was lies. And so, you know, all the times growing up around parents that you are you know kind of live in a fantasy world you almost have to take over the parenting role in a way.

You know, I always had to pretend, you know, that I was, almost try to pretend that I was a really good person. I think [my abuser] “J” kind of convinced me of that, that I was a bad child. I think I’d um, you know, always ah….always ah….be pushed ah, always have to be like you know, kinda like, go along with him or you know pretend I was as bad as him. Yeah, yeah and he always wanted to convince me that I was as bad as he was. And my brothers and sisters just thought I was kind of a spoiled, rotten brat anyway. My stepmother thought I was “suppressive” and that you know, after that, so um, you know um,…you know and he convinced me too that I was really bad, you know, evil.

I mean I think I am a good person but you know like, [I feel I have to ] censor everything….I always say like “my parents live, are at Disney Land (laugh) and everybody else is in the real world, you know.” Um, (pause) yeah, like having to be kind of almost having to be the sane one in the family and having, like as a child I couldn’t really speak out against it and say, you know, that it’s really wacko but I think I’ve done more of that as an adult. Um, but I’ve kind of known that I have to draw a limit to what I say against the church if I want to have a relationship with my parents.
I think in some ways [my experiences] made me kind of a "pleaser," where I’d always try and please people. You know, I’d always try and give people what they wanted. I think I kind of learned that from a young age. You know, as not to worry about my own um, my own issues and what I needed, but worrying about what other people wanted and expected from me.

Yeah, [I’m someone] that other people can rely on. Definitely I knew there was no one [there for me]. Kind of from a young age I had to learn that I was really the only one there for myself. That there was no one really there for me. And sometimes I still feel that way. You know, like there’s, you know I have friends and things like that but there’s really you know, like growing up knowing that I have to be there for myself. You know, I’ve never had anyone that much that I could rely on. It’s just like I’ve been there for a lot of people, like you know even with [my late lover] W. and those illnesses and stuff you know.

Yeah, [if I got sick] I’d have to rely on [my family]. And uh, I don’t think that I could stand that. You know, like having my father over, you know, manipulating me. And you know, um it’s um, it’s unbelievable. And so, when you’re around my father it’s almost like giving up all control, um, you know all your power. Something that I wouldn’t want to do. I mean I’d rather be in a, in a home or something. Don’t have to live under their roof again. I mean I wouldn’t want to [live with my family] but I mean as a last result I could, but I mean um, as long as I live, I don’t ever want to be in that position you know, to where I’d have to go back there.

I mean, to be honest I totally probably more broke away [from my family] around age twenty-six. ‘Cause I went back to school around age twenty-five. [When I was
younger] I was really having problems [in school]. I couldn’t read or write. I was nine years old. Um, I really needed a lot of work. Yeah, I was in school, and I managed to basically catch up within about a year of like tutoring and stuff like that from my school.

Um, I went back to school for hairdressing so it wasn’t until I did that that I could really break away from them. And I moved to Vancouver. And um, got away basically. And just, you know, in the last few years I’ve decided you know, I don’t ask my parents for money or anything because if I do it always gives my dad control over me and a reason to say, you know, try to manipulate me or control me.

[Before that] I was living in Canada and I couldn’t work here legally, so I had to work under the table. And um, so I worked as an escort and the money was good. Um, so I did that from about the age of twenty to about the age of twenty-three. Yeah, um after that I ended up taking a break for a little while and I ended up getting my Canadian citizenship and I went to school and became a hairstylist.

[My roommate] did [domination] for a living (yawn) and was also a student at Emily Carr getting his bachelor degree in art at Emily Carr, and uh, he was heavily into photography so he would get me to not pose for pictures but um, get me so he could focus his camera and stuff and to stand in so that he could, you know, make sure his camera was set and everything. Um but, I still feel that in a way it was still a good experience for me to have shared a place with him because I can understand it more now. Where before I would of thought that someone who did that was mentally ill or something. But now I can kind of see it in a different light

You know and I think I’ve made a lot of changes in my life and worked through a lot of things and um, and I’ve become very self-efficient, you know like very self um
supporting you know. Like um, you know a couple of times I was almost mugged, or you know running from bad people and stuff like that. But I managed to get out of it O.K. I think it’s made me a lot stronger person.

You know, I’ve let just, you know um, become very um, you know where I wouldn’t let anyone do things to me that I don’t want to allow them anymore in my life, you know, become more assertive in that area. Um, well I guess [that began] more with [my late lover] W about four or five years now. Yeah, about five years, to where I’ve been more assertive and um, you know what made me get more assertive was just coming to a place where I knew I deserved better, like working on my self esteem to where I feel like I don’t deserve to have anyone take advantage of me and you know, knowing that I deserve better. And that has to start I think with where you look at yourself and you know, knowing well, I’m a good person and um you know, I don’t deserve to be taken advantage of and used.

I still smoke pot and drink booze and stuff like that, but um, um like you know, like I mean I kind of... It really makes me feel proud of myself, like self pride because of what I’ve gone through, and you know, I mean I’ve managed to keep a job and go back to school and get an education and to have friends and you know (laughing), live a sane life. And um I think when I think about it like, you know, I don’t know how, you know, I mean I think there’s a lot of people that didn’t have this hard a life as I did that are a lot worse off now, you know.

Yeah, yeah I think I have done a remarkable job and I think, you know, when I think back I’ve had to really parent myself most of my life, you know. There was no one really there to parent me. But I think eventually in my life you know I will have someone
there that I can rely on and stuff, well I hope so. One day I’ll write a book and that will be my closure (laughing). You know, I think I’m gonna write a book about my life, you know even if it doesn’t sell (laughing). Just to do it. [This interview has] been good too, ‘cause it helped me shed light on things. Yeah, I think I have done a remarkable job, yeah. The fact that I’m alive today, you know.

Brent’s Story

[My mother] was constantly criticized for spoiling me. I was a big disappointment in—that’s the way I perceived it—that I was a big disappointment to [my father] And that feeling lasted with me until probably about last year. Um, and those again were just perceptions at the time. Talking to my father last year, and him being a closeted homosexual, still living the life of a straight male.

Um, everybody knew how to dribble a ball, everybody knew how to kick a soccer ball, everyone knew how to hit a baseball, or catch a ball. These were all foreign to me. I didn’t know [what] those things were. I only had glimpses of what other people’s lives were like. I, I didn’t know how to act around boys.

Um, whenever I was around [my father’s] family, um his brothers and sisters I’d feel very uncomfortable. Um, they all had really nice families, they had great kids and everything. And uh, I always felt as if I sort of stuck out. There wasn’t something quite right about Brent.

My aunt Jill, my father’s brother, or sister, asked me to spend the weekend. And uh, while I was there they had a poodle named Suzette. I don’t know how old I was. I was
about seven years old I guess. I’d uh, to me cartoons were reality. What I saw in cartoons [I believed]. You know, you can fall off cliffs from 5,000 feet and just have a headache. I picked up their dog and threw it down the stairwell, because the dog used to love running down the stairwell and I thought if I threw the dog down the stairwell that uh, she’d really enjoy it, flying through the air. And it was not meant to be harmful or hurtful. Um, I ended up breaking the dog’s legs.

Uh, the first time I saw a little bird um, I wanted to take it home and I picked up a big stick and I started smashing the ground all around it, ‘cause I wanted to hit it over the head and little stars would appear around it, and then I could take it home. That’s the kind of perception I had on what life was like. Um, uh, I didn’t really realize what [would happen].

[During a family holiday my older cousin] Mike asked me if I’d like to zip my sleeping bag together with his. We were sleeping in the living room. The girls were sleeping in the bedroom. And uh, I thought “Oh, that would be neat, I’ve never zipped together sleeping bags before.” [The next day] we went into the bedroom and we pulled down our bathing suits and uh, he wanted me to fuck him, and I didn’t know what that meant.

Um, I hadn’t heard that language before or anything or even perceived such an activity. [He told me what to do] and then I heard giggling and I looked up and all the girls were watching from a partitioned wall. And uh, I just turned beet red. I felt very very ashamed because I realized that this wasn’t the proper thing to be doing. That this was probably a bad thing. And I felt, I felt really stupid because they seemed to know so much about sex and uh, I was, to me my form of excitement at that time was skipping
rocks and um building forts. Playing in tall grass. That was my typical kid stuff form of excitement. [I] didn’t even know what sex was at that period.

Um, other than the odd Penthouse or Playboy magazine I’d never actually seen a naked woman. Um, not in the light anyways. There was no curiosity or uh, um you know, well this could be fun. You know, give it a try. Um, my father sort of instilled a sense in me that if you want to be a real man, then you’ve got to do something that you don’t want to do. And that makes you stronger.

[As a result] I was engaged to a woman for a while. And uh, I just started thinking about the way that I grew up and uh, the things that were missing in my life, and that if I did marry this woman I wouldn’t be able to provide the things that were so necessary to her for fulfillment. Um, that if I was holding her and kissing her and thinking of a man that that was uh, a really wrong thing to do. Sincerity was very important to me.

Um (pause) for the uh, for the next two years uh, once I started meeting gay people it became the norm that uh (pause) um, if you didn’t have somebody--at least one partner on the weekend--there was something wrong with you. [At first] I thought that they were going to just grab me and pull me off into the corner and fuck me or something. Um, just from what I’d heard and seen on [television]. Um, periods I remember going home [at] night and feeling so ashamed of uh, my sexual behavior and I couldn’t shower myself enough. [I] couldn’t use enough soap.

Um so then around mid 1983 I moved to Whitehorse in the Yukon territory and I decided it would be a good idea to get away from all gay people and uh, the gay lifestyle. [Because] um, just these feelings of “this is really bad, ” this is regret, you know
lots of feelings of regret, that I shouldn't have done that. I really didn't know who I was anymore.

Um, so then I started to change my ideas about life. What I was looking for. Um, I started to go down all the different avenues. I was finding enlightenment for the first time; that there were alternate realities from the one that I knew of. Uh, and that started giving me great hope, and uh, excitement. Um, I saw the beauty of flowers and trees and um, the beauty of the planet earth. The destructiveness and dysfunction of the human population. Um, the dirt, the greed, the uh capitalism, the uh just what a destructive society we are.

So uh, um I got more interested in spirituality. And uh, reincarnation— if you haven't done everything your supposed to do in this life then you’re gonna have to come back and do it over again. Um, and due to understanding karma or Buddhism, I couldn’t walk out in front of a bus and kill myself, even though it looked accidental, because uh that bus driver and all those people would have to live with facing my death for the rest of their lives. And that would be such bad karma.

I’ve got a life-insurance policy and [I thought I’d] leave something for my partner, and um, they can have a big party when I’m gone. I was actually kind of looking forward to it. I was almost sitting down planning how the party was going to be. It was kind of exciting you know, that was kind of neat to do. Yeah, I was planning my wake and I was excited to do that. And uh, really excited to get on with things. Because I’ve spent my entire life not wanting to be here (tears, long pause). So um, so I realized that waiting for the, waiting to die was just getting kind of boring, and um frustrating.
I was interested [in Peter] just because life had become so boring and blasé. Um he told me the things that I wanted to hear. He uh, made me fantasize. He gave me the opportunity to dream and desire and to think about my future.

Um, he told me that he had a house in the interior, and uh, asked me if I’d be interested in moving to the Kootenays. And that uh, he had a large sum of money, hundreds of thousands of dollars in the bank. He was just burned out on life and decided to build a life in recluse. And now that he had met me he decided that life was all important again and worth living.

So in April we were going to move into the interior and uh, I was going to have a greenhouse and a garden, and uh, a clothes line. I was going to build an addition on the house. I was going to get my dad up there to help build it. And uh, we were going to open a guest house. It was on the lake, and he showed pictures of it.

Through this whole process his money was tied up and he asked me if uh, um not directly, but you know he was like “oh boy, I don’t know how I’m going to pay the rent. All my money’s tied up.” And I’m like “well it’s o.k. Peter, I’ll pay the rent this month. And next month we’re moving to the interior.” We went shopping for vehicles. We negotiated a final buying price on a four-by-four. Um, I had ordered a new gas stove for the kitchen. Um, information brochures on gas fireplaces. One for the den and one for the living room. Um, called a gas fitter about coming up to the property, and putting natural gas in. I did a lot of work on our dream home.

[When I came down with] pneumonia [it] gave me an opportunity to see where my life had gone, and how far it had gone in the wrong direction. Um, I had no money left in my bank account. My bills had all bounced, my cheques had bounced. Um, I had
no money to put food on the table. Um, I kept telling [Peter] I loved him and I’d think “well, we’ll just get you into detox and you can come out of that and we’ll get things straightened out. We’ll move to the interior.”

But I didn’t perceive any of [Peter’s deception] because that was the first time that someone came up to me and said “Brent, I know what you want.” And even if somebody could buy me groceries, I had no money to give them. My pension cheque had been returned in the mail. Um, living from paycheck to paycheck, um, I was fucked, without anybody on top of me (laughs).

Um, I didn’t want to hurt him either. I mean, while I was cleaning out the apartment I ended up getting rid of any drug paraphernalia. Um, I was cleaning his apartment, doing his laundry. Um, ‘cause I had always been more like my mother. Very charming and uh, gentle, quiet and always giving. I was always the first one to make sandwiches or tea or soup or dinner and bringing wine and flowers and um, I was always caring about the other person.

[I was on a date recently and] I asked [the guy] if he wanted to move over onto my bed in the studio apartment and it was just three feet away and it was much easier to stretch out. It wasn’t an invitation for sex. It was just more comfortable and um, you know [he said] “How come you’re not aroused; you’re not attracted to me.” Um, so again it was bringing up these feelings of inadequacy that there was something wrong with me.

[Another guy told me] “Brent, the reason why people have sex like this is because it pleasures them. Now, if your not having pleasure you’re supposed to tell me, because I don’t know. I can’t read your mind. Um, if it’s painful then you should tell me to stop.”
So now at this point I’m totally confused, because I’m thinking that I’m supposed to endure as much pain as possible. And that’s what it’s all about. You know, I was so used to pain already that I just thought everything was that way.

Um, so Brent has this naiveté around sex, and communication between people, or your partner. I’m back at being three years old again. And uh, I get uh, overwhelmed uh, insecurities raised, panic attacks. Just because other people are so comfortable and uh, um, I’m at a loss as to what to do. Um, well all my experiences, which [are] all important, and which [are] also so taxing, is uh, like communication, so important. There’s got to be a balanced communication between people. If anyone’s communication is out of balance, that person is also out of balance. And I just know that from experience. So it’s relearning that, and trying to figure out ways of not losing that nurturing. Look at myself as that little child, it uh, needs some guidance and some love.

[I thought about] the people that did love me and did care about me, and I was uh, not a good role model. Life is precious, and life is beautiful. Um, and uh, hey I’m alive and uh, I’ve got my health and I am very well respected by a number of people. I’m well looked up to. But you know, it’s a difficult path to follow now because uh, of the one that I’ve been on. People come up to me in a bar and they’ll say “What are you doing after? Want to get together?” And I’ll say “Gee, I don’t think so.” [They say] “Oh come on, I know you.”

Um, and I was very embarrassed about that.... So, this is a real Doctor Jekyll and Mister Hyde type thing. And it felt really good being Mister Hyde. Um, is he the hairy one? (laughs). It really felt good, really good. Uh, then the drugs would wear off and I
couldn’t live with myself for what I had done. I was starting to wonder if I was developing split personalities.

I wanted to give up alcohol. I’ve never really appreciated alcohol very much; two beers and I was drunk. So, I left alcohol to my parents. But I wanted to, I mean I’d been an athlete most of my life, and uh, the drug use was really hard on me as an athlete. Um, I was a vegetarian. Um, and I’d been really into previously doing magic mushrooms, or acid for spiritual reasons. Um, it had never really gone much further.

I’ve learned that by saying “I’m never ever going to do this again,” it only sets you up for failure. Um, and that there is nothing inherently bad in this world; you know it’s in our perceptions—all those things. [If I do drugs again] it will be for the right moment. It might be for Mardi Gras in Australia, or it might be my birthday. I mean it’s not because I’m feeling bad; it’s because I’m feeling good. And I just want to augment it slightly.

Friends for Life has been um, wonderful very integral in my rehabilitation. And Ride for a Reason, raising money for AIDS, HIV support services. So I’ve got these projects that, you know, that I can focus in on. Um, you know that uh, doing acid wouldn’t be appropriate um say this weekend because um it takes a couple of days to uh, gain some balance back from that experience. That would interrupt my training. Uh, going out dancing until six in the morning. Staying up until the following night. Um, that would undermine my emotional stability. Um, my communication skills and interpersonal skills, all that would fall apart. Those activities aren’t appropriate at this time in my life. Um, and they’re not wanted, and they’re not missed.
Carl's Story

I feel, I guess I'm more comfortable with who I am, more so than I have ever been. Um, [my brother who sexually abused me] would make fun of me being fat a lot. I remember a few times, I remember a few times him really embarrassing me in front of friends that way too. It, it was, it was odd for me because, I mean, my friends were my friends so I mean that didn't happen a whole lot but I remember incidents where it did. And I remember to the point where I would get ridiculed a bit from my family about how much money I would spend on comics (laughing). It really bothered me.

Um, no one in my family deals well with confrontation, no one. Um, everyone talks about everyone else through a third person. No one ever deals with anyone directly. Very, very, infrequently does that happen. I remember, ah a silly little anecdote about me being in a store with my aunt once when I was a very small child and someone assumed that she was my mother and I remember being completely obsessed with making them, making it (in a loud voice) very clear that this was my aunt and not my mother and don't get this wrong. I'm the only person really, that forces people to deal with issues that, face to face.

Um, other things with my mother, in my adolescence um, I was very difficult with her in that I would never, I would never let her know what I was doing or where I was going. Um, curfew was something that I would completely defy, not that I was really ridiculous about it, because I wouldn't stay out 'til like, you know, twelve or one in the morning when I was, say, twelve or whatever. But, I would come home at a reasonable
hour, but I would never tell her where I was going. She would always want to know where I was going and I would insist on not telling her.

Um, there's another incident that happened to me (pause). After, no, I was gonna say after I came out of the closet. I think so. I was out with my friends in college, but that was removed from ah, my friends and my family and the whole town. [My cousin had] been living in Toronto for a few years, but I'd had no idea that he was gay at that point. Um, and, we got to talking about stuff and he sort of admitted that he was gay so it sort of opened a door for me to admit the same. [We had sex and it was terrible]. One, because it was making two of my world's collide horribly, especially the incident he had where he said goodbye to me in my room. It was like bridging a whole other world from my, that I'd carried in my mind into the physical. Ah, that was really distressing.

So finally, it sort of, the moment passed, it was ok, but it's still awkward. Um, I really couldn't face him, face to face for days. I felt very, very ashamed and (pause). I mean, I've seen him a couple of times in passing since then, not sexually but in passing and I feel awkward running into him. There was a period, yeah I guess a couple of weeks later where he sort of went, yeah, that was fun, we should do that again, and I just thought, oh yeah, and I'll clam up again. So it brought awkward feelings that way. That's more a result, in a way I suppose of me not being able to assert myself.

Um, in a way I'm avoiding him because I don't really want to speak with him until I resolve the issues of around the abuse. Um, because there's, well for a long period there was a lot of anger towards him, a lot of resentment. Um, and, um I'm afraid of it, I'm afraid of confrontation with him because it's, that's an ongoing theme that I, I learned when I was young too, is to avoid confrontation.
And there were times when I would feel really um, disgusted with myself because there were times when I would have sex with people or do things with people that I really didn't really want to do. I remember giving oral sex to some people that I thought were really awful and I remember feeling really awful about that afterwards. Even a few weeks ago I let myself do that again and I was really shocked by it and I was bothered by it for days, that I'd, that I'd had sex with this person that I found so repulsive. Yet I persisted and I didn't quite understand why.

Um, and then something changed in the power scheme, where all of a sudden for me I just didn't want to do that anymore. I felt it very unfair that (laugh) and it's very clear where it comes from um, I found it very unfair that [my brother] could penetrate me yet he would flatly refuse for me to penetrate him. So I felt, ok, so if you're not going to do that then I'm not going to let you either anymore. I thought ok, I've done my duty here, you know. I, I remember thinking about it in those terms: thinking ok, I've done you all a favor and you know what? I want something for me now. So I'm not gonna have sex with you anymore, I'm gonna have sex with someone who I'm attracted to.

And that sort of incident. In the long term we hardly began to feel how, depressed about it um, very empty is the most, the most predominant quality I would say. It was like after the dust would settle, after the elation of it all you would feel very empty, um. And I remember feeling sort of jaded at that point when I made that realization I thought, oh, I know where this [anonymous sexual partner has] been 'cause I've been there but I'm just so far past that now. I felt sort of sad about that, it was the other, another sort of realization I've lost and further emptiness. And I remember after that, I remember going through very serious, it was like a mourning process, after that. I suppose it was a
mourning process because it was the death of a façade that I'd been carrying my entire life or that I'd worn my entire life. So in hindsight it made sense that it was a mourning process because it was something that I was very clearly putting to rest.
Yearning for Intimacy

Allan’s Story

Um, well there was a lot of problems in the family. Um, you know my parents I think, didn’t get along well and they were fighting a lot. I was the youngest child of five children in my family of origin. Uh, I had three brothers, uh no, I had three sisters and a brother. And um, they are all nine years older than I am, um and a year apart from there. Um, and uh, um I grew up with a mother and father until I was nine years old, or at about eight-and-a-half my parents separated.

My father—when they separated—had come back to Canada, and um, so I ended up living with my stepmother and my father, and uh step brother who is four years younger than I am. [There was] my stepbrother Miguelle and by the time I was about um thirteen Julian came to live with us from South America. And that’s my stepmother’s son. And um, he was living in South America with his father, and then he came to live with us at that time. So then after I was thirteen there was Miguelle and I and Julian. Um, you know, Miguelle and I got along pretty good when I was younger. Julian and I didn’t get along was well.

Like my parents had a lot of custody battles over who would get custody of me and [they were] going to court, and involving my teachers, and you know like the principal of the school and you know, um things like that. So there were a few court cases after the divorce where they were fighting for custody of me because my...mother gave
my dad permission for me to come and live with him for a year. But my dad didn’t want
to return me after that and he kept me. So my mother went to court trying to get me back.

Um, generally my dad actually kind of spoiled me. Like um, I was always my
dad’s favorite child. If anything my dad gave me even more attention than my mother
did. Um, yeah I always felt like, I mean underneath I knew that my mother really cared
about me and stuff, and loved me but um, I mean now I really believe that she was just
not strong enough in her own life.... And um, the only thing was she wasn’t a good
enough disciplinarian and she, she didn’t have the resources herself. Um, at that time too,
she was living with someone who was a gambler and they would travel around and
gamble. So she didn’t really have a home—a sturdy home for me to live with her. Um, so
it was always only be for short periods of time, and then I would end up having to go
back with my father.

Um, I have one sister who would be ten years older than I am, and she did a lot, it
seemed that she took a lot of responsibility for me. I think the only one who would have
like helped me or, or the only one who would have really helped me probably was my
sister S. Um, ah help me a lot, you know when I was a kid she was there kind of like a
parent to me. You know, when caring for me and stuff like that, quite a bit.

Um, my other siblings had kind of a tendency to think that I was kind of spoiled,
and um, you know, felt like I needed more discipline and they weren’t really close to me,
not really. Maybe [not] with my brother, um, but with all of my sisters I tend to get along
very well. But my brother also doesn’t get along with my sisters very well so, he doesn’t
really get along with any of us too well in the family.
And I think he does have uh, some jealousy because it was really unfair when I was a child. I got away with a lot of things my brother didn’t. Now [it’s] kinda to the point where I don’t have a lot of contact with my brother....You know, and my brothers and sis--my brother always thought I was kind of a brat anyway and you know he was just teasing me and joking around. And my brother would never see any of that real bad stuff [that happened with my abuser “J.”] ‘cause he’d be there a bit you know like they would say oh, don’t cry like baby.

I didn’t have a lot of friends but I did have some friends that I’d do things with, and hang out with. Um I’d get involved in interests and um did things like that. You know, um (long pause) so um.... [“J.”] was kinda my only, well I had another friend who was about my age--“T.” And his older brother went out with my brother and I hung out with “T.” I had another friend I did things with and stuff too but um, “J.” was kind of um, you know. I don’t know why I found him so fascinating....plus there was no one else with a car that I knew that was a teenager that would hang out with me and do things.

You know like I, I mean you could like, why did I keep going back, you know when [“J.”] was abusive to me? You know, [he was] someone who’s more like an adult. To me he was an adult. Yeah. And he was pretty, you know he would have been an older teenager, so....sixteen, seventeen cause he could drive. So...I think he even drove before he was allowed to. I think he drove before he had a license, or was allowed to. His parents would let him drive I think when he was like fourteen you know. [It was] you know dependency, and it was kinda like a game.

It was hard for me to get away from him. So you know, I always relied on my parents financially, you know for backing and you know for anything I needed, kind of
knowing well you know, I could get help from them. Um, so I didn’t really make the
break. [When I was nineteen my doctor told me ] “you’re HIV positive, and you’re
probably not going to live very long.” And that was the extent of it. And my mother had
died like two months before that so it was quite a shock for me. So my family started
freaking out when I came home from the military, and um, like my father, particularly my
stepmother [said] “what are we going to do if you get sick?” You know, and on and on.
You know, and there’s also I guess if worse ever came to worse I mean I could always,
you know, that I could always end up going home you know and with my stepmother and
father. Work for them or something.

Um, I also ended up getting into a relationship with someone when I was, right
after the military when I was nineteen, who was in like, the drug Mafia....and then we
ended up becoming partners....I mean I really felt, like I knew he really cared about me
and I felt like, you know, he wouldn’t harm me. I guess we were together for about a year
and a half.

You know, and so many of my other brothers and sisters are, most of them are
way more screwed up than I am, you know. Um, you know the only one who’s
somewhat together is one of my sisters, B, out of the five of us. So it would be B. and I
that are really the only two that have managed to you know, I mean, they all work and
some of them are just so fucked up, um. It’s just like, it seems like B. and I are the only
two that kind of, you know, are Da Da! going on with their lives you know, and not let
the, so much of the patterns continue.

Um, I’ think I’ve learned a lot of compassion for other people um and um I’ve
really learned to understand you know, like people that get into prostitution and drugs
and things like that. Like, you know a lot of times people just like to judge them like, *oh no, they’re losers and they’re this and that*, but I can kind of understand what would lead up to making them go into that life. But also in some ways I don’t have enough, maybe you know a lot of sympathy for them because I realize like you know, it was something that I got into and stuff but I managed to get myself out of it um pretty much and to, well you know, I’m not a prostitute anymore.

Um, kind of, it’s funny; it’s not really funny when I think I’ve had a sexual history almost all my life....but I think for a long time it made me very subservient to people. Um, very um, not trusting, um uh, for a long time, until about the age of twenty-five I relied on my parents a lot. You know, for financial help, um you know. Particularly my dad. My stepmother was never, like my stepmother was pretty level-headed through that but she was very dependent on my dad in a lot of ways. [I’m amazed at] just how dysfunctional my family was, you know. Well, I have friends [now] that I can rely on and really good friends that I can talk to and things like that.

**Brent’s Story**

Um, dad was king in the house; whatever dad said was the golden rule. And you didn’t debate it; there was no room for discussion. Um, (pause) and that was that. I went on for many years trying to impress my father and his side of the family. So I learned how to rebuild cars; learned how to build houses. I took a course in scuba diving; advanced diving; night diving. Um, I got a girlfriend and
we dated for three years. An uh, we were gonna get married and that was all for him, so that he’d be proud of me.

And uh, um after a while of doing these far out things, you know sky diving, transferring all across the country jobwise, I realized that somewhere along the line I’d given up on my life and I was living my life for my dad. And uh, and then I started to really resent him.

His, my brother and I are different. My brother, um, straight male um, saw a ball and ran after it, and was excited. Um, my parents didn’t transfer or move for the first five years when he was a little boy, so he had some stability growing up. My mother had, um, wasn’t working, she had full-time for him. Dad was really excited and proud about George because George could do anything basically. Um, he was always uh, excited to talk about my brother George um, and get involved in scouting and his school projects, school nights, parent-teacher nights. Yeah, ‘cause he was excited about doing things with my brother.

Um, I’d go home because I wanted to see my mother, but I’d come home to see, to see mom and anytime I tried to show any affection to my father (pause) uh, [I] remember it was his birthday and uh, I was around I was, I’d say I was around twenty years old I guess, um, I wrote him a card and in his birthday card I wrote that it’s so wonderful we’re finally getting along and um, uh I look forward to future good times together.

[He took offense] that I should let [the family] know that there was at any time a difficulty or discomfort between the two of us.” It was very important to him that everyone thought we had a wonderful relationship. Conformity [was
important to him], but he would also, he was seeking approval from everyone around him. And uh, um, which is probably where I picked up a lot of, um his behavior, just in constantly seeking approval from people or from himself.

And uh, the first time I stood up to my father I was about seventeen years old. And uh, I had uh, actually I was nineteen years old. I had a rough day at work, and I had a bad headache, and I came home and um, mom gave me a big hug and a kiss and uh, she said “dinner will be ready in twenty minutes, why don’t you go lay down and here’s a couple of aspirin and I’ll call you when dinner’s ready.” Mom was great, as she always was. She, she was the person who kept me alive all these years

She was, she was just too beautiful, and caring. I said “Dad I’ve got a headache. Leave me alone please.” And I got up and I said “I’ll be downstairs. Just give me a shout when dinner’s ready, o.k. mom.” It’s the first time I ever left home or um, talked back to my dad. He said “no one turns their back on me!” And I just looked right in the eye and I said “I do.”

[My mother] lived for me. I was her complete source of inspiration and focus. You know bake log cakes, doing my laundry my ironing um, yeah, she loved me unconditionally and I loved her back unconditionally. And uh, when I went to Whitehorse I thought it would be a good time for my parents to get back together again, you know, like last of the kids are out of the house, you know the two lovebirds can get back together and get on with their life. It just seems like a natural progression.
But the dynamics of the family were missing, because they didn’t love each other. The two of them were just staring at each other not knowing what to do with each other. She’d asked for a divorce from my father before and he said “no god damned way, nobody divorces a Patterson. You’re with me until you go.” Um, it broke my heart (lengthly pause).

I came home one year from Whitehorse for a surprise at Christmas time, and uh, I was uh, I knew that this would really mean a lot to my mom. You know, I’m wearing my best clothes and best appearance and I want dad to be proud of me, I want our relationship to be good. This is my father, he’s retired staff sergeant of the Mounted Police and now working for the Attorney General, um uh, criminal law and he’s driven out to the airport to pick me up drunk. And I remember I started to cry and went downstairs into the basement to be by myself. This is too much. Um, and then it was I guess the following year, the following year-and-a-half that [my mother] died (lengthly pause).

My mother was my only saving grace. She died in 1989. It was like I could never take my life [while my mother was alive.] She was very supportive. I came out when I was about twenty-one years old….and she was so happy that I was uh, that I was gay. She really hoped that one day I might meet a nice lesbian that wanted to have children. And then maybe, that that would be a possibility and if I didn’t then maybe, just maybe someone would like to have a child and she would raise the child for me. The glow in her eyes, just the sparkle, the thought that she could raise my child, she was so excited. All she wanted was a baby that she could hold and love, who would love her back..
Just about the time [of my mother’s death] my friend who was running [a
grow] house died of a cocaine overdose. [I helped his parents take in the crops].
And while I was doing that uh, the police entered and put a gun up to my head
and arrested me and put me in jail. Having grown up around policemen, I’m not
afraid of them. You know like “this is dad (laugh).” And uh, I guess I was really
enjoying it because I knew how my father would feel. It was like, um, this is
really really gonna hurt him. This is good.

Um I phoned my brother who is also a policeman and uh, asked him uh,
for advice you know “what should I do?” and what not. [He said] “but you were
engaged in illegal activity.” I said “don’t give me any attitude.” So uh, he gave
my father, he wrote letters of reference for me. [My father] asked “Do you have
any idea how much this hurts me?” And I’m like “Yeah.” Almost gloatingly.

Um, when I went back and talked to [my father] last year I said that “All
my life growing up you told me that the number one thing in life was family. And
that family came first and family will always come first. They are the most
important thing to be observed.” (yawn) Excuse me. And I said “How can you say
that, when you weren’t there for me? You wanted to have kids, then why didn’t
you raise them? Why didn’t you get involved with them? Why didn’t you take
them to school? Why didn’t you show them how to play ball?” “If I was going to
have a kid, I’d be so excited.” I said “You couldn’t have cared less if I was there
or not. All you were interested in was your job.”

I said “If you didn’t want kids, then you should’ve given us away. Given
us to someone who would have wanted us. Given mom a divorce, let her go.” Um
I said um, “I come home for a visit and you know, sit there and you’ll run down my cousin Bill. He doesn’t have a job. He doesn’t work. He lives at home. He’s on welfare. Um, he’s such a lazy bum. You know, he could wash his parent’s car but he doesn’t. He could you know, get odd jobs but he doesn’t.” I said “What do you say about me when I’m not here? I’m on disability. I’m not working. I look pretty good don’t I? I could probably go get a job. I could work, couldn’t I? What do you say about me when I’m not here?” I said “If the family is so important then why do you run down the family instead of supporting them, or saying hey what can I do, what can I do to make your life better? I’ve noticed that you’ve got some problems. I’ve noticed that you’re not doing so well. I’ve noticed that you can’t afford to put food on the table. But no, you don’t.” So I said “Don’t give me any God damned attitude that family comes first, because I’ve learned from you that it’s the last priority. Words are really cheap.” He started crying. (tears)

And I think “well I was a baby once, what happened? How can I have so much love and excitement for a baby when I don’t for myself?” Um, I think [being sexually abused] made a real dent in who I was. “Cause, um, um (pause) it just seems like a pinnacle point. For many years I was trying to remember um, when I was happy. Um, when life was good. And uh, it seems like everything was fun, or O.K. up until then. Then everything started to get bad.

Most of my sexual encounters were, were out of a great need of love on my part. People tell me that one of my biggest problems is that when I meet somebody it’s really hard for me to have sex with them because I want to make
love. And uh, I don’t know how to communicate or inter-relate with people on a non-sexual level. Because all my life it’s been sexual.

And uh, it’s hard for me to have friends. It’s hard for me to develop a friendship with someone, because it’s totally foreign territory. Um, [I] hadn’t been communicating for years. It’s just been like people communicate their needs and then I play it back. And I never had the chance to experience pleasure. I tried. Um, so I’m learning to communicate for the first time.

So after about three years of this I met up with Mark um, and was with him for six years. He was overweight. Um his idea of a good Sunday was lying in the couch watching sports and uh he didn’t give me back rubs, he didn’t hold me the right way, kiss me the right way. Um, he didn’t romanticize. There was no foreplay. There was no communication

And uh, it felt like there was nothing left to experience. I didn’t want to have sex anymore. I didn’t want to do drugs anymore. Um, I knew that I had to change my environment first, because I was living with my partner, and a roommate who were both uh, into chemicals, psychedelics. Um, so I was using the drugs to continue the relationship so I had to end the relationship. Um, so uh, yeah the hard part was coming off the drugs. And realizing “hey, I don’t have any friends who don’t have drugs.” All of my friends do drugs. And it meant moving and getting a new apartment.

Um, you know when somebody says “do what you have to do and don’t look back, just go forward and don’t turn around.” So I tried that approach and I just said “look, it’s over and I can’t be with you any more. It’s not fair to you; you
deserve someone more loving.” Just as in the same case that the girl I dated for three years. “It’s not fair to you that um, when we’re making love and you’re enjoying what you’re doing and I’m not. Or maybe you’re not enjoying what you’re doing, but you just think you are. You deserve to have someone love you back equally. And uh, I don’t love you.”

I said “you do too many things that bother me and upset me and I don’t know why you do them, but you do.” And uh, just differences in people. So the relationship was ended, and uh about a month ago I guess, he was a mess and every time he looked at me he started crying and I just looked at him like the Rock of Gibraltar. Then a week before we were moving, um I broke down and I started to dissolve, and uh, cried from a place that I’d never cried before. Um, I was mourning the loss through memory of all the good stuff.

So I was really mourning um the loss, the too incredible big loss. And uh, and there were times, many times, when um it would come up from nowhere and I’d be sitting and my breathing would start to pick up (short deep breaths) and I just started to wail. And uh, um, (tears) my roommate would come home and I would be wherever I would be, and I’d just be, I’d be on the floor crying and hyperventilating. Just the reality was starting to set in about what was happening. And uh, that went on for about six months.

Even today, I had lunch with Mark today, (pause) um I miss him. It’s um, yeah I miss the Mark that I used to know. Because I didn’t want to hurt Mark. Um, now to this date, Mark and I have separated since last October, and we’re still friends. We enjoy each other’s company.
So then uh, in March I met up with Michael, and uh, he was very, very very happy. He was very warm and intimate. He was very very loving. He knew how to hold and how to kiss me, how to make love to me. [But I was broke and] I said “Michael, you’ve got to do something. You’ve got get your cash flow started. Get that money out of the bank. Sell some of your jewelry, sell some of your paintings, anything. Please!”

Um, and it was at that time that I found out that there were warrants for his arrest. He’d um, had a criminal record as long as your arm. Um, his last partner died a mysterious death, um a drug overdose. He wanted me to put my life insurance into his name. Um, I really think that he was planning on killing me. (tears).

[Now] I try to look out for myself first. And I say “No, you knew me; you don’t know me.” And it’s empowering also. It’s um, uh it feels good to be able to say no to somebody. It feels good to take somebody’s hand off of my knee and say “don’t do that.” (tears)

I had a date the other night and uh, when he came over to my place we sat on the loveseat for a while and I poured him some tea, and some cookies, and uh, we were holding each other and that felt nice. Um, and [it was] taking all my energy to come up with the words “I don’t wanna have sex. Is it O.K. if we just cuddle?” So uh, so I said “No, I’m just not in the mood to have sex.” And he said “Well that’s O.K. I’m not in any hurry.”

And uh, then the panic and the fear would subside and I would just hold on to him, and it felt so nice to just hold onto him, and uh, the warmth of his
body. And uh, um we wrapped our arms around each other and sort of nuzzled each other. It was a nice evening, and that felt really good. Really nice. Just the touching and holding. And, he stayed 'til quarter-to-one in the morning; he arrived at nine P.M.

**Carl's Story**

There were times I remember when I first sort of discovered it that, it's like, I remember (laughing) this is funny to describe. I remember having this experience with someone once, after I had sex in washrooms for a long period of time where I met someone who wanted more than sex. He was looking for sex but he was also looking for a partner; he was looking for more. And I remember thinking back to the stereotypical song I was thinking about you know, “looking for love in all the wrong places” and I remember at that point, being of the awareness that I had crossed over that path a long time ago at that point. At that point remembering what it was like to have been him, where there was a period where I was looking for what he was looking for and looking for it in the wrong place, but yeah, over time I learned that that would not happen and there was a (pause), I developed an ability to disassociate myself even further to the point where I would not look to those expectations, that I would realize that it was only sex and that it was not, I would not find love from any of those relationships or experiences.

I was just looking for any sort of attention, I suppose that way. Yeah, I suppose love was much on my mind too that way, 'cause I did feel lonely as much as I did have ah, good friends in the relationship I had with the people that I lived with. At that point
[it] was very harmonious. I had two roommates that I went to school with and we all got along very, very well. Um, it was just yet another need or desire that I had to fill somehow.

Um, I suppose because I, it was so void from me for so long um, because I was very heavy I never well--and gay I suppose--but at that point in my adolescence I hadn't acknowledged that. But yet, there are emotional things that I received from [my family] that are also dangerous to my well being. Attitude, assumptions that I find are detrimental to what I feel within myself. Assertions that they make. Um, assumptions that they make. Um, things that they don't say, that they don't communicate.

With them, yeah, yeah, yeah! Pained silences and responses to things I shared with them (laughing), yeah. There's always a lot of support from them. There's love there, it's just hard to get past the stuff on the surface. It's hard to get past (pause), what ah, what they believe I should be doing with my life. This is probably the most common thing.

Yeah. Some members of my family I feel safer, more safer with obviously. My oldest brother and I have, are, have a, a very good relationship, a very honest relationship. We share a lot. Um, [my eldest brother] and I sort of lead separate lives in a way, it wasn't until I was much older that we kind of accepted each other or got to know each other. My oldest brother was very reserved and he would keep out of [family strife]. He, he was very, a meek person. He was much more fragile in a way. Um, not to say that he wouldn't fight back when he was really pressed to things um, but generally [he] didn't fight as much as [the rest of us] did.
[My other brother and I] don't really communicate. Um, I really haven't talked to him much in the last couple of years since I moved out of Ontario. Um, I talked to him a couple of times on the phone the first year I lived here. Since I started doing counselling I've only talked to him when I've really had to, which is um, when I've seen him face to face, the last few times that I was in Ontario last year. But I, nah I haven't spoken [to him].

Um, (pause) [my parents] would have I suppose a similar dynamic ah, between, ah similar as myself and my next oldest brother although it wasn't as violent between the two of them. They wouldn't fight, they wouldn't smack each other, they really wouldn't do much of that. I suppose in much the same way that my dad would belittle my mom, [my brother would belittle me] in front of his friends. 'Cause that would happen too. I suppose in ways [my father's] temper was very similar [to my brother's]. Yeah, the stubbornness, both very stubborn.

The Repetitive Experience of Betrayal

Allan's Story

Um, um I guess I felt like, you know my parents kind of cared about me even though they had a strange way of showing it. Um, but I felt more like um, maybe they wanted me for their own security. That they wanted me to be around them for their own security and not necessarily for what was the best for me. You know, and also like kind of being a pawn between my parents. It's like their last kind of weapon against each other. You know, they could use me.
You know even though my dad always tried to say, *oh I was there for you and you know, I was there, always the one that helped you and stuff*, he really didn’t. My dad’s very manipulative, very controlling—and my mother would kind of, she wasn’t actually strict enough. You know, she was very, you know, let you do your own thing type of thing, and not as controlling as my father. And that’s one thing I really missed about my mother and you know, my mother passed away when I was nineteen. ‘Cause you know, even as my mother with um, you know difficulties with her relationship and that she was always very level headed and you know, she was sane basically. You know, I could talk to my mother about anything. You know, I could tell my mother anything. You know, I mean I could tell my mother that I had shot someone yesterday and she’d be “well that was really stupid.” I mean I could at least...I didn’t have to censor what I talked about with her. You know um (pause) which was good.

Uh, school was very hard for me. I think um, like I don’t have a lot of memory of like my school in California before about the age of nine. Um, and uh, I think a lot of times I would um, sometimes kinda not live in, you know I put I’d blank a lot of things out. I think that’s probably why I don’t remember a lot of my childhood. I just wouldn’t look at it. I guess in a way, um, that um also a lot of it too, my father kept us very busy. Really busy, like a slave driver. So a lot of times we didn’t have time to think about our problems. Like, you know after school we were constantly working for my father, doing things around the house. Stacking firewood and it was endless, you know. Um, doing things for him. (Long pause)

Yeah um, my dad kept us so busy doing chores for him that we had very little time to think about our problems. You know maybe he wouldn’t have me running around
working as much [now] but he'd have me, you know, he tries to control every facet of your life. You know, um, everything; he’s just so controlling. I guess my dad created such a need for us, for people to need him. You know, controlling our lives. Um, the whole time growing up from when my parents divorced until I um went and uh lived on my own. Yeah, you know there were always demands that he would make.

And um, [to get away from my family] I had taken some gold kugerands that my father had that were supposed to be mine when I was eighteen because of a car accident I was in when I was younger. Like a minor fender bender in California, and um, so I took these gold kugerands and I cashed them in for like, you know at that time gold was worth a lot of money, but because I wasn’t eighteen I couldn’t sell them legally so I just sold them for like a third of what they’re worth to some shady jeweler or something like that.

[When I was nineteen my doctor] assured me, he was sure my test would come back negative. So then I was called in to go over my results, he just, basically he told me that I was positive. He didn’t give me any counselling or anything. And I ended up going into denial of it for years. Well my family found out I was HIV positive right after that too because I had told one of my best friends at that time and she freaked out, and she wouldn’t speak to me anymore, or have anything to do with me. She went and told my family that I was HIV positive And um, so I ended up telling them “no, it wasn’t true,” that she had lied to them and I wasn’t HIV positive.

So I denied it, and um, ended up going into denial for years about my HIV status. Um, [denial] means that um I didn’t disclose to partners that I was HIV. Um, that um, my denial was so strong at times I didn’t even remember that I was HIV. Um, I don’t worry so much about getting HIV now, um (pause).
[I was partners with a man for about a year and a half] but after we were separated he asked me if I was HIV positive. Like kind of like he had an idea, like I felt like he had gone and found out he was HIV positive so he would assume that maybe I was and I said “No, I’m not HIV positive. Um, I was tested and it came back negative.” [I was afraid of him] because I knew that there were people that, um that uh, would get in his way or he didn’t like and bad things would happen to them. So um, his, his dealings were very covert, I wasn’t aware, you know it wasn’t like right out in the open. It was very, you know, it was very, I was just told not to repeat anything I saw or anything like that.

[My] flashback occurred, oh when I was around twenty-six. That would have been about five years ago. Yeah it would have been about five years ago. But the only reason I remember [being sexually abused] is because I had a flashback. Um, one, one flashback, and uh, and it was him taking pictures of me, telling me that I was going to be a movie star and you know, and stuff like that. And um, um leading me on for pictures. And um, and then after the flashback the memory of [the sexual abuse] immediately came back to me.

[My abuser] was just an extremely manipulating, evil person. You know and I found it very fascinating and um, he had a car and he’d do things with me and take me to the drive-in and stuff, you know, take me to theatres and movies and you know....I don’t think he had any control. You know, no control and he was very spoiled. You know his parents would give him money to do anything he wanted and, you know, he had very little control. I think he manipulated his parents a lot [too].

He’d get me to, you know, kind of blackmail me, and get me to steal and convince me that I was a really bad child. Um, that he was helping me out by showing me
adult things. Um, and uh, that went on for a long time. Um, I didn’t interpret it as a means of expressing affection, but um I kinda like, he would always use it in the context like he was showing me adult things. Maybe to him [it was entertainment]. Entertain him, you know, um, I could be his entertainment. Yeah. Yeah, definitely. I always had to be one step ahead to know, you know like, um, you know, it wasn’t all like sexual abuse or anything. It wasn’t all like sex stuff. It’s like, you know, entertain him.

Yeah, I could adapt and be like him or just be as bad as him. You know and he’d get me to tease my nephew who was three years younger than me and do mean things to him. Call him a Mexican and you know, taco burrito and you know, do bad things. I remember once we were in a theater and he found this lady’s wallet and there was only like ten bucks in it and there was all her ID and stuff and he throwing her wallet in the garbage and keeping it and having me know and wow and stuff and just thinking what a mean thing to do you know, to this poor woman um. And he used to get me to go clip, steal clothes with him and steal stuff and you know he’d take me (yawning) into stores and get me to try on clothes and steal them with him. And he’d steal clothes and [I’d] go along with him and [he’d] just convince me of ways of doing things. He’d be the only one around and I think if I did go to someone, you know, like who would my family believe…him or me first

And you know, um, there was never anyone I could really go to and, and, and if and my family wouldn’t believe me. My mom would always kind of take, my mom was always the type were she felt she had to take the other person’s side or it would appear that she was taking my side because I was her child. So you know it was always like, oh
don't be a baby or just, you know, they wouldn't believe me I think if I did tell them things.

Well, my brother um, my brother's in really strong denial about it. He has had contact with my brother and he's stayed with my brother, after that, for you know about a year. You know, as [he was] my brother's friend I think [my brother] has a lot of guilt around it too. Um, but um, my brother's in total denial that he could have touched his children. You know my brother thinks, was in denial of the fact it happened to me and my nephew for a long time, but he's kinda to the point to where maybe Allan. it did happen to you, but I don't really think he did anything to my kids. I'd know if he did. (pause) And I think the reason he's in that denial is that he can't fathom someone sexually abusing his children.

Brent's Story

And uh, and through conversation [with my father] it came up that uh, he kept telling me when I was younger that uh, when I came out to him about my sexuality that uh, sexuality is a choice, it's not preceded (sic). And I'd argue with him or argue and that day it finally made sense to me because he stressed to the utmost one final time as the tears started rolling down his face that sexuality is a choice, and that uh, when he was my age, he didn't have a choice. He had to be straight. And uh, he married my mother who was, I guess lesbian, uh, to have the model family

And uh, my father didn't want children—my mother did. And children would have been a nice addition to his job resume as chief of police. So, my father's pretty well entire life was an act, and my mother's life again was much of the same. Um, he used his being
straight as a vehicle for promotions through the R.C.M.P. Um, if he had been a single
R.C.M.P. member, uh, he wouldn’t have gotten the same advances that he did.

Yeah. Yeah, his life started out as a lie that kept building and building and
building. And uh, it’s a weird feeling when you think that your whole life or existence is
part of someone else’s fabrication of an alternate reality. (pause). The most frustrating
part of it was that none of it made any sense. There’s, there were friends of mine that
were living in a real life, and there were my parents that were a make-believe family. And
so my, my idea of reality was uh, so screwed up.

Nothing that I did was for me; it was to impress my father. To gain points with the
boss, or relatives like my brother. Uh, [like my father] I didn’t do anything for myself.
My father would, when he went to cut the lawn on our house, he wouldn’t stop at our
lawn. He’d do the neighbor’s lawn, and the second house up the street, because he didn’t
like to see the difference in one lawn cut and another not. Um, he’d edge the boulevards,
and he would do the entire street. When I talked to my father last year to confront him on
this, he didn’t remember any of it. You know, it was like “get on with your life; it’s just
the past.”

[When I was younger I dated a woman. I was naïve sexually,] and uh, but at the
same time I was supposed to be the young male stud who knew everything. So I avoided
[sex] at all costs. And uh, uh we did try [to have sex], um um, and I was thinking about
men, any men, all sorts of men, orgies of men, anything to get myself aroused. (lengthly
pause). So my girlfriend and I broke up.

Uh, [later] I wanted to um shock people sexually. And [sex] was, for me I felt that
I was being strong and brave. It’s like “I’m really strong, you can do anything to me, you
can’t hurt me.” Um, and I don’t know why. It just went that way. It was, I felt like I was brave and going to be the teacher or the guinea pig. Um, but I never understood how that really worked because I never felt stronger; I always felt a loss.

Um, William was attractive, nice looking. He sort of fit the suit. Um, again, it was a logical choice in decision making in that relationship. [But] I didn’t love him. I was embarrassed by him. The whole relationship [was] a fraud, and I only wanted to be [his] lover because I only thought I had a couple of years left, and I had no idea that I was going to live this long.

[My relationship with Peter] had been a con from the start. So uh, I played the happy housewife. Played my part to the tee. And I actually took quite [a lot of] satisfaction in it. And while he was in detox, I realized as well, besides that he was on welfare, that he had no house, there were no paintings, there were no companies. That he had nothing. Um, there was no house to move in, there was no greenhouse, there was no clothes line. Gas fireplaces weren’t going to be installed, the hot tub was not going to be put on the deck.. Um, Peter has been treated repeatedly for living in a world that he fabricates minute by minute.

[I became ill] and uh, when I came to, things just didn’t look right. All the money was going [to buy him drugs]. I was feeding his habit. [He said to me] “Ha ha ha, you’re so stupid. You’re so naive. Weren’t you ever going to clue in?” (tears) And uh (pause) he used all of the things that I hold dear: trust, intimacy, love. And he just twisted them all around (long pause, tears). So, it’s really hard for me to feel safe with anybody now. What uh, we were intimate. It’s like everyone’s after something. Everybody wants something. Um, (pause). So yeah, I don’t really trust people much anymore.
I didn't know who I was anymore. I didn't remember lots of things that happened. Uh, because people would stop me on the street and they would say "wow I saw you on the weekend and you were sure having fun." Or uh, people would call me up and say "lets get together," and I didn't know who they were on the telephone. I didn't know who these people were in the street that I had sex with. Uh, it's bad enough being nervous around all these people, let alone not remembering having sex with them. Um, asking someone if they would like to go out on a date, and not realizing that you already had sex with them a couple of times. Uh, I started realizing it was starting to get out of control.

(long pause) Um, so many people think that I'm a wild sexual man. Um, but that's who I used to be. It's not who I am today.

Carl's Story

Um I was always obsessed with being very honest about things, about people's perceptions of things um, but if people would make assumptions about me or something I would always, I was always very adamant about them knowing, correct things. [But] the secrets [my family] keep, yeah. The secrets they keep, and the secrets more, more, even more so than the things that they do say to me. 'Cause the, the things I find most damaging are the things that they clearly won't say to me or avoid saying to me. Or when I bring them up, they avoid them. Yeah. Yeah, I don't think, it's funny but I think they don't really realize how sometimes not saying something says more than actually saying something.
Um, but I was never a very good liar, especially with my mom. My mom would always know when I was lying. It took quite a few years to sort of, to ah, to sort of (laughing) get a handle on that one actually, where I could trick her into things. And I suppose that's something I learned from my older brother, because he used to do that sort of thing too although the difference between he and I is that he would get into trouble, ah, and I wouldn't. But generally I didn't like doing that, I didn't like the feeling that it created within me, having lied about something, especially if it was something of my own demise.

[My father] was kind of unpredictable, I mean not always was I fearful of him but there was, there was always a level of having to tip toe around him a bit and to be careful, just sort of be careful. I was always on guard with my father. He was really mad with me too because I was really indignant with him, I guess because my aunt had been poisoning my mind with ideas about him. Yeah um, I (laughing) remember a point where I sort of messed around with the food that he had in, in the fridge in the basement, which he ate out of. I remember putting salt in his milk and a couple of other really ridiculous things, um with a friend and then I, I remember having to answer for it later and I flatly denied doing any of it. And it was the only time I really flat out lied to him, or to anyone pretty much.

My friends weren't, [my brother] was mixed up in a rather bad crowd. There were, there was an incident where they broke into a variety store when he was early in high school. Um, I'm not sure exactly what all happened about that, if he got fined or convicted at all. I know his friends did. I know there was a, I know that there, for a
period of time he was under probation and I think that was because he was caught trafficking um, grass in high school. He was very careless about that; he got caught.

Um, but the interesting thing about that is I was, I was part of that whole secret. He pulled me into that, there was always a level of, of ah, camaraderie between us that way. Or like, that was sort of a place to pawn me that I accepted, I should say. Um, about him doing subversive things like that and me being secretive and not telling anyone. I remember actually going on, on a drug deal with him, taking a train somewhere and me being the, the ah runner when I was say, twelve or thirteen. Carrying an Adidas bag full of grass. I had no idea how much was in it or what; it wasn't that big a deal. But, I mean I was involved in that sort of thing. There was also an incident where he was growing grass and I sort of confused, I ah, I agreed to tell my mom that there were just some seeds that I found and had planted.

Yeah, I was being forced to do, to do uh, these other things [while] on another [hand] lying about these other things. I don't know, I guess in a way it's where I sort of learned to lie about things. With [my brother] it was, it was different because I was more disassociated from it. It was more his doing and it was like, yes I knew about it and ok I won't tell anybody but, you know, I wasn't about to blow the whistle on him or anything, until a point actually when I did. Later when I was probably thirteen and then that dramatically changed our relationship.

I'm not sure why that was easier [to disclose that information]. [The sexual abuse] was sort of in a different realm in a way because, I suppose because I was more directly involved. It was ok. It felt like it was an equal partnership; it was a pact to keep the secret. Whereas these other incidents were more, ah I wasn't involved in those, there were
things that he did that I knew about but that I wasn't directly involved in. So the level of secrecy or the level of confidence wasn't as important to me.

It was interesting, [the sexual abuse] was like this secretive thing but was kind of fun and secretive uh, and then it became more than that in a way....and he sort of convinced me that it was ok and that it felt good and, and that was fine. He probably just said it's ok. He said yeah, but it's ok. Or, oh, I can't honestly say, I can't remember exactly what he said. (Long pause). Yeah, yeah, yeah he did convince me of that, so it was ok. 'Cause I didn't know what was happening and he sort of went, you know, it's ok, shh, it's ok. I can't remember exactly.

And I mean, I was only half-asleep. I, I mean half, well, yeah, I was half-asleep. I'd woken up; I'd be woken up. And I don't honestly remember how many times that happened; if it happened only once or more than that or whatever. I do remember, one thing that I do remember that, that makes me worry that it did happen more than I think in that maybe I hadn't awoken. Um, I remember about that age in school, feeling very unrested. I remember being a very, very tired boy in the morning at school, like I hadn't really gotten much rest. I knew part of it, I suppose was the stress of the environment that I lived in but part of me wonders if there's, if there's more that happened to me while I was asleep than I think and that perhaps this one time, or maybe couple of times that I caught him in the act, if that was when he got caught and not only when it happened.

I must have been about seven, I guess [when I started having sex]. I, I have trouble trying to place in my mind if that was before the incidents with my brother or not. It seems to me it had to have been. But I can't honestly say. It's, it's confusing in my mind. It, it's confusing because I, I, the thing is I, it seems to me in a way, when I look
back on it it's still [unclear]. I find it very strange that I find it arousing in a way, having fondled my cousin, which makes me think that maybe I had experienced this with my brother first, and that I had discovered that it was fun to play with the penis. I'm, I'm not quite sure where it all falls into alignment.

I guess just confusion was mostly what I [felt]. Like I wasn't really afraid of what was happening, I just didn't understand what was happening. I wasn't afraid really, I was just kind of confused....when [my brother] penetrated me, no [I did not feel aroused], because that was a whole other thing and I didn't quite understand that at all. In fact I, I remember asking him at one point I guess, he had ejaculated because I remember him, I remember saying, *you're peeing in my bum.* I remember saying that. Um, I remember seeing it as more of a wrongful thing. And I remember thinking that was kind of funny that [my brother] related [to it] as physically dirty.

Um and at that point there was a point where I would, I would touch him while he was sleeping and, well obviously he must have caught me once or twice and was insistent not to do that. But I became craftier and found that I was very sensitive to his sleeping patterns and that I could get away with it without him knowing. Um, later with friends, with sort of acquaintances at parties, I was always the nocturnal person who would be the last person to fall asleep after all of the other kids, teenage kids I'm talking, had past out and I would sort of target someone and get into their pants, without them knowing.

And then, after being caught that way, I remember, just being very still and just trying to almost disappear and pretend that I wasn't there, that I hadn't done what I had just done. I would immediately just freeze where I was and pretend I was asleep. To the point where I would almost even try to fake snoring sometimes.
I wonder if [my brother] does sort of suspect what's going on just by virtue of the fact that I haven't had any contact with him. I mean he must realize that there's something going on with me in my refusal to talk to him and to you know, acknowledge him at all. I know that he, that in some levels he must be hurt by it and I suppose when he thinks about it he would understand why. He must care that I ran with him. He was older than me when it happened, I mean he must be, he must have far more colorful memories of the incident than I do. He was awake, older, it's, it's just not possible for him to have repressed it the same way I have.

Um, I found it very interesting that after I [admitted having sex with my father while he was asleep] the other night [with] my partner, having thought that I had told him this and he was quite shocked and surprised. 'Cause I was sure I had told him but I guess I hadn't. (Laughing) Uh, so that was the secret that I'd always kept.

The Resignation to Abuse

Allan's Story

Um yeah, at the time of my sexual abuse, when it started, um my family was very dysfunctional. My parents were fighting a lot. Like severe fights. Like beating each other over the head with frying pans. [They were] very physically abusive towards each other. And there were a lot of drugs and alcohol and parties. My dad was using a lot of drugs and alcohol. Um, my mother was drinking occasionally. And I also believe that my
mother was sexually abused by her father. So that, it was um, she had a lot of denial around it because of her sexual abuse.

And uh, it was pretty difficult, plus during the time [of] my parent’s divorce, there was kinda like a lot of games going on, and being pitted against the other parent to see who I wanted to live with, and going to court and, um it was very messy, messy divorce. It’s funny too, you know I’m talking about it and just realizing how terrible it was. When I think now I think a lot of it you know there was such abusive stuff too, a lot of sexual abuse, but a lot of it was you know, mental and emotional abuse and physical abuse as well. You know, I mean um it’s just amazing how terrible my childhood was when I think about it.

I think now, when I think back like, what a horribly abusive childhood I had. It was very hard. It was very hard. Most of the time growing up my stepmother was very strict with me, and it always felt like she had to break me or she had to change me from the way I was. [My father was] always very bullying, very abusive, really very manipulating. He was very verbally abusive…mentally and emotionally. You know, where he’d lash out verbally or, you know sometimes he would punch us in the arm or something. Not real hard or anything. He’s never been physically abusive. Um, but uh, you know he would just start getting very verbally abusive and he’d get really angry. He’d use his anger as a real, he does, he still does it, he uses his anger as a real manipulative tool.

I was um, I think the sexual abuse started when I was about four years old. Um, and I was sexually abused by a neighbor, um, who was a friend of my older brother’s. [He] was nine years older than me. Um, I was sexually and physically abused by “J.” and
I believe mentally abused too. I was sexually abused too by another girl that lived on the block who was older and used to baby-sit me and my nephew. Yeah it seems that there were a lot of people, you know and also when I was fifteen I was sexually abused at a spa by, in Las Vegas by a man who kinda raped me in a spa--made me perform oral sex on him. Um, so it seemed like there was a lot of sexual abuse in my life, like you know, instances where (laughter) um, and um, so that went on for quite a while through my childhood. Um, from the age of about four to the age of about eight-and-a-half, almost nine. So for about five years, [and then again when I was fifteen].

Yeah, [my babysitter] lived like, you know there was only one house between “J.” and her and she used to like kind of sexually abuse us or get kids in the block to fool around together and stuff and um, we were pretty young. And um (with a slight laugh) um, I don’t know why I’m laughing, but it seems so strange and funny that there’s another one on the block. You know it was like the whole neighborhood was sick or something (slight laugh). [The babysitter] used to like get, like she would have, pretend like her and I were fooling around so she could get my nephew and “J’s” niece to like fool around and do things and stuff.

With [the babysitter], like we’d be under sheets, so she, like her and I would pretend, she would get me to pretend like I was having sex with her so that she could get my nephew “C” and “J’s” niece who were like, I would have been three. I would have been about seven, maybe six maybe, no probably about six and “C” would be about three and J’s niece would be about three and she’d be watching all of us. And so she’d get them to like fool around and stuff, you know um...I wonder what “J” did to her you know, you never know.
[The neighbor] “J.” who lived across the street...sexually abused other children who lived in the neighborhood too. Um, and um, I remember [years later] he was telling me about sexual abuse, how he was being charged with sexual abuse [of his] step children. His wife was divorcing him and charging him with sexually abusing her children and he was saying to me, oh you know I wouldn't do that and just underneath, knowing yes you did, that you're a sick bastard and you did sexually abuse your children too.

You know, and ah, it was really funny . I knew he was at one point, we were sitting in the car and he goes Allan I have to ask you something and he didn’t even say anything, but I knew he was gonna ask me to have sex with him Um that was why, so I knew he abused my brother’s children and one of my nieces has even told me that he used to do things to her. Um, my nephew who’s three years younger than I am remembers in the (?) someone sexually abused him, so my sister knows he’s a pedophile and child molester.

Um, um “J.” was very, had a lot of power over me. He was very, if I didn’t go along with what he wanted to do he’d be physically abusive. And um, yeah he did, he was very physically abusive as well as sexually abusive towards me. You know, like slapping me around and scaring me. Physically hurt me. Um if I didn’t do what he wanted, you know he’d get very rough on me. Um, you know like slap me around. Um, you know um, and even sometimes if I did do what he wanted he’d slap me around and hurt me. And it was almost like he knew just enough to hurt me and scare me.

He always tried to keep me in fear. It seemed like he tried to keep me in fear. He really fed off my fear. You know, and also I think that he really, he really got a kick out
of seeing people afraid and intimidated um, um, suffering. He loved to watch people suffer. You know, like he really got a lot out of watching other people’s agony… and he really enjoyed seeing me in fear, you know scaring me.

He kept me under his control. And he was very good at just hurting me enough physically, like in ways that wouldn’t show or leave bruises or things like that. You know, like he’d tickle me until I’d wet my pants, or he’d practice karate on me. Um, he’d take me in his car and he’d scare me. Um, you know, like driving erratically. Um, and um, the form of sexual abuse was kind of like almost like, a lot of sexual abuse I don’t remember. Kind of like “I’m showing you things.” Or I remember he’d take pictures of me and tell me I was going to be famous. Yeah, like nude pictures of me.

And I think it was a thing to where he’d see how scared he could, you know where it was a thing where he’d push it even further and further to see what more he could do to me, you know, just to the point, just under enough to where he knew it too far, but he never knew where that was you know. He just got an adrenaline out of scaring me. That was his big kick in life, scaring me. You know, like that’s how he got a kick out of stuff.
I [began] medicating myself. Yeah. Definitely. I think I started as a teenager, I started um, uh you know smoking pot and things like that. You know, and I wouldn’t tell, of course, my parents about that. Um, the first time--this is pretty funny--but, the first time I ever smoked pot, not that I started at, I started smoking pot around when I was fifteen. Around fourteen or fifteen. But the first time I ever had pot I was six years old. And that was because my sister was watching me, and I was um, with some friends of hers and my sister had gone to the bathroom and this guy, you know, let me have a couple of tokes off a joint or something.

You know, um, yeah I started when I was around my sister when I was in California around when I was fifteen. You know, smoking pot with my sister. The only one would have been my older sister. She was into smoking pot. I think when I was younger she was into diet pills and stuff like that too. Oh yeah. (laughs) I’ve done lots of other drugs [too].

I’ve done just about every drug there is, to be honest. Um, just about every drug there is except for probably a lot of pills. I didn’t do a lot of pills, and probably nothing like PCP. But just about everything else I’ve done. You know, like I’ve done LSD, I’ve done cocaine, I tried heroine once, um I smoked opium, I’ve um done Quaaludes, um, um, MDA, uh um I tried mescaline. Oh I hated it; it was horrible. Once I tried methadone--drinking it--ooh, and I was sicker than a dog.

One thing I can say is I’ve never been like a drug addict. Um, but you know, except for like pot--things like that. But I was never got to a position where you know I was, when I was fifteen I, I think for a short time I got addicted to Quaaludes. Um, but
uh, mostly my drug use has just been smoking marijuana. But I experimented and tried a lot of other drugs.

**Brent’s Story**

My brother was five years older [than me] and his main source of enjoyment was teasing me, beating me up. He never left bruises, but uh psychological scars. Pinning me down on the floor and slapping me in the face, tickling me ‘til I peed my pants. Um, just really not fun stuff.

Uh the only boy I knew was my brother and he constantly made fun of me. If he was home, it was just to pick on me. ‘Cause, well my brother probably started it with the teasing and the bullying. And uh, I would be picked on at school and uh called names. And as I got older uh guys would call me faggot in a teasing way you know like really attractive men, young men, you know fourteen or fifteen years old would come up behind me and whisper “you’re a faggot, aren’t you?” The thought of punching somebody, with my brother beating me up for already a couple of years, and the thought of hurting somebody just horrified me. Even in self-defence..

[My father would] systematically [take] off his belt from his RCMP uniform, and get [my brother and me] to drop our drawers and bent us over and then strapped us, um for not telling the truth, [even though we did not know what the truth was.] Uh the strappings! And one evening he picked me up and my brother because we were fighting and um, he lifted us both off the ground holding us by our hair, um slammed our heads together, and uh, um threw me into my bedroom from the hair on my head. Um [he]
threw my brother into his bedroom and uh, uh there was lots of yelling and screaming going on and um, my father, my brother was, my brother was teasing me and bullying me and my father finally thought that this was enough.

So he said, “you like to punch and tease your little brother, well I’ll show you what its like,” and he dived on top of my brother on top of his bed, and the bed just blew out from underneath them and broke in half. And he started uh, he said uh, “go ahead, punch your father, see what it feels like.” And my brother gave him, like a good punch in the gut and he was, and his, my father already had a bit of a paunch and his fist just absorbed into this mass and then my father just started punching him.

[On another occasion] dad comes home and he sees me lying on the couch and he says “Oh, what’s the matter? Poor boy not feeling too well. Oh poor boy, can’t take it in the real world. Well you’re just going to have to smarten up Brent, your just going to have to do better, and when you come home you can’t just be lying on the couch.” He said “There’s work to be done around here” He got up from his chair; he spun me around on the floor and he said “Nobody walks away from me when I’m talking.” And I turned around and I started to walk away and he grabbed my fists, he spun me ‘round again, he pulled his fist back and he was gonna give me a full throttle right between the eyes.

My mother grabbed his arms, she started crying and she said “Bob, don’t please!” And he gave me about a fifteen minute speech [of] which I don’t remember anything, ‘cause I could only feel my heart beating, and my whole body shaking. And uh, um I, I at that moment I wished he was dead. I wish that I could have just beaten him into a pulp. Just destroy him completely.

Um, I thought my parents were gonna get a divorce, because they fought so much.
[My mother] was trying to escape the sexual abuse that she had gone through as a child. Um, her step-father would rape her, she was raped on a city bus, and she had, uh, a couple of miscarriages. And I guess I would have been seven or eight years old [when I was sexually abused] (long pause). And uh, um so my cousin told me what to do [sexually] and um but I was kind of bothered and upset that I was going to get my privates dirty. And uh, just the whole uh, the methodology of doing such a thing. This was all going through my mind while he was like “do it, do it, do it!” And uh so he’s got his legs, he was lying on his stomach and he was spreading his behind apart and uh, I was trying to stick my penis in his butt.

[The next day] Norman swam out beside me and started tugging at my bathing suit trying to get it down, and uh, the girls were swimming over to me as well. And he said uh “Betty wants you to fuck her.” And uh, again this is like way over my head. I just couldn’t believe her. You know, it was like blowing me away. And uh, I came up with “I don’t think I should do that, because I could get you pregnant. And um, I would really be in trouble if I did that.” I sat beside my mom a lot. They didn’t come close to me or proposition me anytime I was around my mom.

Um, I think it made a real dent in who I was. ‘Cause, um, um (pause) it just seems like a pinnacle point. For many years I was trying to remember when I was happy. Um, when life was good. And uh, it seems like everything was fun or O.K. up until then. Then everything started to get bad.

Um, I wanted to be loved so badly, and uh, instead I was used repeatedly. But I was only used sexually and uh, um, was used more often than not. Whatever they wanted. Anything they wanted to do. And uh, [I] um began sort of a dating process in which I was
looking for love and they for sex. And uh, for somebody who’s just hoping to have a wild
sexual encounter, and here I am this really opening up, and embracing them and loving
them as a human being. Um, they get their rocks off and feel wildly satisfied and I’m just
left there damaged.

I, I um, dated a man. I dated a man in January and I found out, it turns out that he
was a sadist. And uh, um he tied me up, bondage and discipline and uh, um degradation.
Um, that lasted about three weeks. It’s better, it was more attractive to be loved and used
sexually, even though I wasn’t being loved I was just something to poke.

And it was only last year when I finally confronted [my father] on um the abuse
that I had experienced so much as a child. And uh, [he] got angry at me for bringing up
the past. And he tried to make me feel really bad to try and gain some closure, or to try
and discuss why these things had happened, from his perspective.

Carl’s Story

Yeah, [abuse] was directed towards my mother. I can think of one incident really,
that really sort of um, scarred me I suppose. It was very traumatic for me. I remember an
incident where um, my father was trying to make some sort of point with her at
something and she would not, she was sort of dismissing whatever he was trying to say.
And there was a point where he was trying to make her hear what he was saying. And he
ah, I remember him, I remember him sitting in a chair and I remember him pinning her
wrists to the chair, being very forceful to the point where it made me hysterical.
[I was sent to a neighboring friend's house] but I remember watching through my window, or through his bedroom window which had a clear view of the side of our house. I remember seeing that he had come outside, the fight had come outside and there was....I can't remember exactly what it was, if he had her sort of nailed [her] up against the screen door or what, but I remember, I just remember flashes of fast moving actions and, and a crowd of neighbors sort of gathering (laughing) on the corner of the lawn watching. So I didn't watch very much but that was the most dramatic episode that I can think of.

[My father] was probably drunk but I can't say honestly. Um, there were times I remember when I was young where we'd go out for a drive with him if he would come home after work or whatever and we would go and visit his friends and stuff and more often he would drink a fair bit. He'd always have a few drinks, um and it's sometimes that was ok maybe, 'cause he would loosen up and he would open up about things and talk about things, and he would be a little more docile. Whereas when he's stone sober he's very cold and very short, not in an impatient way but just in a very dismissive and insecure way.

But not much happened from that really. It wasn't as if he got really bothered about it, he just sort of yelled at me a bit and ah, that was it, he went away. That's probably when I started eating a lot more too, because I was very obese when I was a young boy and that's probably when I started to become a very compulsive eater and divulged a really bad diet, because that was sort of left to my own accord. I was always a heavy child anyway but that's probably when it certainly got a lot worse.
[My father] was a man who always um, who's temper would flare to a ridiculous degree where he would be gritting his teeth and swearing, um really uncontrollably. So his threats were more intimidating than anything. I never, I never saw any violence from him really. I know that later my brother did when he got in problems, into trouble with drugs in high school and I know that he man-handled him a bit.

Yeah, um, my middle brother who was my abuser was difficult to deal with. He also had a very short temper, much like my dad but very fiery. We had, we had a very tense relationship growing up. We used to fight a lot; we fought about anything all the time. Um, I always sort of resented him I suppose because he always bullied me, always.

Um, he would do silly little physical things that would bug me. I remember there was a way he used to slap my cheeks that used to drive me crazy, but he would be, he would insist on doing it. And of course I would always try to fight, to uh, make him stop but he was bigger and he would pin me and then my mom would come in and make him stop (laughing). But that sort of dynamic happened a lot, little things like that.

Um, verbally we were very nasty to each other as well. Um, he would just say really, really awful things about me being so fat and my friends would laugh. Yeah, in a, in a way, not that he sort of corralled them, he had his friends but he would belittle me in front of them. So I really didn't enjoy that very much.

I was first introduced to sex when I was seven or eight. [I had sex with my brother for a while I think], and that further became something that I experienced with my father. When I was seven [my brother] introduced me to sex. Um, it would hurt. At first he, I guess he, I remember him teaching me how to masturbate and, and I remember it was sort of [interesting]. I remember after that he had penetrated me a couple of times and I don't
remember exactly, a lot of it bad, but I remember distinctly one time waking up, um, sort of mid session and passing [out on] sort of what was going on

It's interesting. I was just having a, a remembering last night trying to figure out how that whole incident began...with sex with him because I remember another point and I kind of think that this is where it began, where he got the idea. I remember being, staying over at my aunt and uncle's house, this is a different aunt and uncle, um, and one of their sons. I, I guess they slept in the same room. I don't remember where I slept but I remember coming in, in the morning and I don't know exactly what was going on um, but they were doing something and it was, they were kind of being secretive and keeping, and they were still under the covers. And it was secretive for me and I just kept being, insisting, going "what's going on" [or] whatever and my cousin grabbed my hand and like, just rubbed it over his crotch, over his pubic hair. And I'd never experienced that before, so I was kind of fascinated by it. And later I remember in the morning um there was a point where he was in the washroom and I asked if I could fondle his penis because it was kind of, I was curious about it all.

Uh, and (laughing) I remember doing that, just sort of petting it and then him being very interested about washing my hands because he said that, that was very dirty. Um, so I remember doing that and I kind of think that that might have been the beginning of the incident where, what gave my brother the interest in the idea to do this, to have sex with me. [I tried it with other men who were asleep and] I remember one guy really freaking out and just saying that if I touched him again he would break my fucking arm.

I guess (laughing), I can mention this just because we mentioned it the other day. Um, admitting the fact that um, at a point when I was having these um, episodes of acting
out sexually with people that were asleep, that there was a point after it happened with my brother that I, that I used to do this with my father. And that there was a couple of incidents where I actually penetrated him. And there was a time where I did ejaculate, I suppose in much the same fashion as my brother did with me.

[I would awake and find my brother] penetrating you or whatever it was that he did....And I remember feeling so traumatized by the whole experience. The pain of the, the memory of the pain of it was distressing. It just was a horrible, horrible experience and I remember that really bothered me for a long time.

Um, one because [my partner and I] discussed this and I'd started to deal with the, the repercussions of my abuse and he knew that [anal sex] may trigger things for me that way and he didn't want to hurt me that way. And he was worried about hurting me physically, because the last few times before I'd sort of went no, um there had been a few incidents where it was sort of painful for me and I had problems with it. I'd had, you know, post trauma with it. Not in a huge way, but it was, it was difficult.

The Experience of a Sexual Obsession

Allan’s Story

You know, um I knew that I was gay. You know, I knew that I liked boys from about the age of five or six years old. And then, um, after when I um ended up leaving [the U.S.] I guess um, I ended up experimenting a little bit with my [step]brother who was younger than me. I mean it wasn’t intercourse or anything like that. But, there would be like mutual masturbation and things like that. Um, with “Y.”, and um then “Z.” came to live with us from South America. And “Z.” kind of initiated it, and then we ended up
kind of fooling around and stuff and at the same time it wasn’t anything really heavy or anything like that.

Um, so now when I’m thinking about it my sexual history started when I was four years old basically. Um, and I didn’t really start dating men and stuff until I was about seventeen. Um, and then I came out and I started um being sexually active and uh, I really feel that that’s the time I got HIV. At the time that I had met this guy I was kind of, like, I um, [was] hustling. I was, when I was seventeen I started kind of hustling on the streets. And I had met him because he was another hustler. And um, we had ended up having unsafe sex.

Uh [we saw each other] maybe about six months to a year. And then later I ended up working as an escort. Um, and all of that was safe sex, when I worked as an escort for a couple of years. So I worked as an escort. Um when I worked as an escort I would have started around the age of, oh my God, I would have started around the age of about twenty and it continued to the age of about twenty-two or twenty-three. Working as an escort through an escort agency.

And one thing, it’s funny, at that time I was living with a roommate who was into domination. Um, he’d take pictures, like he had the living room was like into a dungeon, like a whole dungeon and like I’ve never personally been into dominance or submission. I really have no interest in that or S & M. No, [he didn’t take pictures], not of me. Maybe he would. But I think a lot of his pictures um, uh, I don’t know if he took pictures of dominance and submission.

Brent’s Story
It’s hard for me to have sex. Um, I’ve had so much sex in the past, I don’t want to have sex anymore. I’d, for the most part I don’t enjoy having sex. Sex turns me off. Um, so much to the point that I don’t want to go to bars, I don’t want to go to nightclubs. Um, because everybody hits on me. Everybody wants to have sex with me. Everyone wants to go home with me.

I always thought (tears) um I had uh, by the time that I’d figured out that I was gay which was probably around fourteen or fifteen years old. This was more so through conversations, through high school chatter, “he’s gay, he’s not, he’s gay, he’s not” than in investigating what gay is and seeing boys in the shower and stuff, realizing that that excited me and uh, so from about fourteen years on my whole life was a facade. I had a couple of “feelies” when I was younger, with, with girls but I was terrified. I didn’t even know the (pause) um location of the genital areas. Um, um I was scared that I would be sticking my finger where it shouldn’t be, you know (laughter)?

Uh, and I was terrified of sex; just terrified that [my girlfriend] might want to, uh, have sex before we were married. She, she asked me to have sex with her, um near the end of the relationship. She found out that all of her girlfriends had had sex, and that she was the only virgin that she knew of, and asked me “If I would please (laughter) show her.” So to me there was no choice of, of what sexuality you chose, it was, there was no choice.

Um so uh I returned to Vancouver, uh Victoria actually and uh realizing that it wasn’t working with women um, went out to experience my first gay bar. So um, you know spend fifteen minutes showering and shaving and a little cologne and put on a fancy shirt, and go off to the club and do a little dancing. It’s quarter-to-two [and you]
look around the room, decide who you want to spend the night with, and uh, go home and uh fuck, and uh, no condoms.

And uh, uh I didn’t like condoms, I didn’t like the way they felt, I didn’t like putting them on; they used to make me lose an erection when I put one on. Um I really liked the skin to skin contact. and uh, it just felt natural and beautiful and the condom seemed to remove all that. Um so sexually I uh, I just continued basically being a bottom sexually, so the partners began to build up and multiply after a certain period of time. Um and, I began to obsess on sex, and I couldn’t get enough and um, so I went from the bars to the parks and um, bathrooms to um anywhere and um, anything goes. And uh, um, so I got into all sorts of different scenes.

Um, from being a nice naive little boy into um predatory sex. And uh, sex with as many people anywhere, anytime. Yeah, on my part where I wasn’t actually the monster; I was receiving the monsters. At a bathhouse leaving the door open. Um, having a group of men watching me getting fisted. Having two men fist me at the same time. Um, there was a cross over that happened um where it was no longer painful. The body would start to stretch and um do things totally unnatural. Just as much as a woman giving birth to a baby, it’s like you can almost will your body to uh on a cellular level to start to stretch and separate and accommodate whatever you wanted.

Um, and then after these sexual escapades went on, I remember one evening I came home and my roommate was, he had just gotten home from work and I’d been doing crystal for a couple of days, and uh, I remember unzipping my pants and pulling out my dick and saying “come on, you want it; I know you want it. You’ve wanted my
dick all the time. Come on, come and get it!” And I actually chased him around the
apartment until he locked himself in his bedroom, afraid of me.

When I was in Palm Springs last year, um I met a man who was um, uh, very
experienced in fisting and leather, S & M sex play, and uh I’m pretending I’m the tough
guy. He’s sitting beside me. We’re on the pool deck, and it’s about midnight. You can see
the stars at night; it was quite beautiful. We were alone. We’re in a nude, uh, hotel
complex. And he starts squeezing my balls, and talking really dirty to me. He’s telling me
he’d like to uh, squeeze my balls until they pop. He’d like to uh, squeeze all of the semen
out of them and uh that he’s done this to guys before. And uh, he can milk the semen
right out of the penis.

Uh, he walked over to the hot tub that I was in earlier and uh, um I invited him to
sit in the hot tub with me and uh was actually quite amazed at the size of his genitalia
(laugh). And uh, um (long pause) sex for me was more, in another way as well, sort of
like trophy hunting. It was uh, um I wanted to see how big a penis I could accommodate;
I wanted to see if I could take a full hand or full arm; I wanted to see what my limits
were--how far I could go.

[After I allowed him to go too far, he said] “no, that’s not what it’s all about at all.
Some people, having their balls held tightly and squeezed is a real turn on for them. They
get off on it. It will trigger ejaculation of semen, even though you’re not doing anything.”
Um, so he said “in your case I was probably close to completely crushing your balls.”
And uh it was actually almost enjoyable the feeling, the transformation I was going
through.
And uh, by 1996 I just couldn’t have sex [any] longer. It was becoming too too painful. Drugs were the only way that I could have sex [with my partner]. I’d been on antidepressants for the last three years of uh my relationship, and it impaired me sexually. The only way I could get off sexually was by doing drugs as well, so it was a catch 22.

[Recently I had a date] and repeatedly he made gestures like “let’s take our shirts off,” “let’s take our pants off,” “let’s get naked.” So finally we got naked, um, but um, there was no sexual excitement for me at all. Um, no erection, no arousal, nothing. And uh, he’s fully aroused and wanting to have sex. And uh, he left and jokingly I said uh, I pointed to my crotch and I said uh “I’ll work on this and see what I can do.” (laughter) Um, because I don’t masturbate anymore, I don’t um, do anything sexual anymore

Um, and then getting back to what I was saying about sexuality and masturbation, um, looking at nude photos of men don’t sexually arouse me anymore. Um yeah. At one time yeah. Even at the thought of looking at a naked man, I was aroused. Um, so I picked up um, uh, it’s called First Hands, uh um, short stories. Something that I probably had for nine years and never read. So I, was reading it, yesterday I guess, and uh, it took me to page eighteen before I got off (laughs).

Carl’s Story

Yeah, I still didn't feel comfortable with all of that, I didn't feel comfortable with girls or having sex with them or dating them or, I suppose just because I had gone through so much emotional stuff when I was younger with girls. I remember another incident when I was probably fourteen or fifteen where a friend of mine had set me up
with a girl who absolutely would unquestionably have sex with me. No questions asked. And when we got to sort of, we got together and I sort of fondled her a bit and stuff but I could not get aroused and she sort of couldn't understand that. So, anyway I masturbated her until she climaxed but it was, it was very, very tense experience for me because I felt all of these expectations that I couldn't fulfill.

Um, and that was compounded by the fact I suppose, that I was gay and wasn't really to, ready to acknowledge that either. Although it was at a, in a small way at that point, [my friend] was the very first person [I came out to], and it took quite a while to come to that with other people. In fact there was always a question whether he was [gay] because he did tend to be a little bit effeminate and very animated. Um, but he wasn't. Or still professes not to be, but he's married and he likes having sex with girls. That's the way it is, as much as who ever perceived whatever. It, it takes years. I mean, there's still members of my family who I'm not out to yet and some friends who I don't tell as well, although most probably know now and at this point in my life I wouldn't really feel that uncomfortable with people finding out.

Um, I suppose something that I, I could mention and I've been wrestling with in the last few years, is the issue around having anal sex. Um, yes, there's, there's not, there are more incidents there actually. Um, [penetrating my father anally] only adds to my issues around anal sex and how I act out in the way that I was taught. Um, when I started having sex in parks, generally it was older men, uh, quite a bit older than me. To the point where I finally made the (sigh), I finally made (laughing), I remember making this commitment to myself saying, ok, I'm absolutely not having sex anymore with any man
who's old enough to be my father, I'm just not doing this anymore. Because I really sort of had my fill.

I suppose there was that as well and that, that would transpire further into having sex, sex in washrooms which I further explored after that. After parks then came washrooms and that became an ongoing obsession for a long period of time. A very long period of time--years. I'm trying to think of the first time I discovered that it was possible, um probably, (long pause) eight years ago maybe. Yeah, I would say. Eight or, seven or eight years, yeah.

Um, and I suppose by, (laugh) the (?) in a way because you could have sex with a number of different people in a very short period of time. In a short period of weeks. And I'm always, I always, I suppose whenever I try to penetrate someone a few things come up. [Once] I had come up from a party and so I'd been drinking and [my friend had] been drinking um, and we got to talking about sex, to looking at magazines and then to the prospect of having sex. Um, and I remember him wanting to penetrate me and he did and it was very painful um, to the point where he damaged me a bit. I remember I did bleed um, he couldn't understand why I wasn't getting aroused by it and why I couldn't relax. Um, and I can't remember exactly how we finished, but I remember the next morning.... to the point where once my partner and I started seeing each other and he expressed interest in having sex. And I remember, I, at some point anyway I recounted it to him and I sort of got past it at a point and there was a period where we had anal sex a lot and it was fine. I found it very pleasurable at that point.

There's times where we'll engage with sex with a third person and he usually penetrates the person, sometimes I do. I remember an incident a few months ago though,
where I couldn't um, I don't know exactly what it brought up in me but there was, I couldn't, I couldn't maintain an erection and be able to penetrate this person. Uh, there was some sort of block that came up and I just could not do it. And that became very difficult for me as well because, and then it became almost like an impotence issue which I knew it really wasn't but, it just became very pointed with three of us in the room. It made me fell very awkward in that I couldn't perform. I do remember that. Yeah, well I had sort of been interested [in anal sex], but I just could not do it. I guess, yeah. It's always a fearful thing. I mean I, I've been able to do that since then with other folks um, but I'm always very, very cautious about that.

The Sense of Safety Through Connection to Others

Allan's Story

Yeah, I'd run away and end up going to live with my mother in the States for a while. And then I'd have to come back. And I did a couple of times. And then when I was older I would run away. I mean, then finally it got to the point where I wasn’t running away to either parent. I would just run away period.

It was neat to get away from my parents. And I liked it. I liked being away from my parents and their, their you know craziness. I think that was a lot of my fear around HIV and getting sick, 'cause I was always afraid that if I got sick with HIV, I'd have to go live with them. [My father would] use his anger as a real, he does, he still does it, he uses his anger as a real manipulative tool. And uh, you know, like no matter how angry
you get, he’ll try to top that and just, you know—intimidation. [And] I mean it was scary
for me as a child knowing my parents were in Scientology and stuff.

Like one time I took the bus from, I was in California at this time with my father,
was back down there. And I took the bus from Los Angeles to Florida, and Maine when I
was fifteen years old, by myself. Um, it was quite an interesting trip (laughs). Um, you
know. And having freedom; it felt like being free. I think when I was younger and I used
to run away from my father and go to my mother I felt like I was free too.

[I never felt free with “J.”] He kept me under his control. Um, to where I was
afraid of him. But at the same time I wanted his companionship, I wanted to hang out
with him because I looked up to him because he was older—a teenager. And um, you
know I was kind of impressed. You know how most children, small children are
impressed by teenagers, they just think they’re wonderful. I kind of felt that way about
him. But um, I spent the most time with him. So, I think he sexually abused me the most.

We used to always, he’d pick me up from school when I got a bit older and take
me and we’d go watch like um, he was very preoccupied, he really liked violence. He
really liked seeing people in pain. He was really a sick sick person when I think about it.
Um, now um, but he really liked like blood and guts and he’d love to see like he’d take
me, he took me to Chainsaw Massacre when I was a child, he took me to The Exorcist
and he used to regularly take me to Bruce Lee movies that were playing in town. And you
know, things with lots of fighting and peoples’ necks getting broken and...(sigh) It kind
of scared me, but I think I didn’t really understand it.

But um, taking me around and uh, um, you know to like scary movies and stuff.
He always tried to keep me in fear. It seemed like he tried to keep me in fear. He really
fed off my fear. Yeah, always testing his limits with me and you know, trying something more to scare me even more and more you know. I don’t know if I did know my own limits because it was always like I had no control over it. He had all the control. And um, he would use that control over me and, um.....um.....you know, so I did, it was like I didn’t have any of the control. He had all the control. So it wouldn’t matter what my limits were, it was up to him. You know and he’d show me things and get me to do bad things too. Keeping me in a place of fear.

Yeah, and I remember I’d be at his place and I’d be afraid, I was afraid of the dark and I’d be like, I’d want to go home but I was too afraid to cross the street and it’s just a little street. I was afraid to cross the street by myself, I was afraid of the dark. Like he’d tell me stories or something like that you know, and I don’t know. My parents and family would be at home you know and like I’d end up spending the night at his house and just sort of being afraid to duck the blaming, you know like afraid to duck the dark. And I was afraid of the dark until I was twenty-five (laughing). You know, it stayed with me, being afraid of the dark.

And a lot of it too, he’d try to keep me afraid of things, you know, like he’d keep me real scared. You know, he’d tell me scary stories and scare me erratically in his car. I remember we’d go to this, like, down by where we lived there was this vacant lot and he’d do doughnuts in his car, like just spinning around in circles, just spinning around to where I’d beg him don’t do that anymore you’re scaring me. You know he’d still do it. He always had me convinced he was crazy and if I didn’t do what he told me that I’d be in big trouble you know um, a lot of intimidation.
Um, like in his car when he’d do doughnuts like being afraid that the car would just go out of control or ah, you know like, sometimes like when he’d tickle me, feeling like you know he was gonna kill me because I couldn’t breathe, um or he’d smack me around and um, you know terrorize me. A lot of times I really felt safe er, unsafe and you know sometimes I think when I think back now that maybe he mentioned that he was gonna kill me or something, you know, that he could kill me, just go too far and that would be it you know.

Um (cough) and kinda knowing and thinking that one day he was gonna go too far. Maybe to kill me or something, you know. And he used to tell me like, really scary stories and stuff about you know, people getting killed and you know, um. I remember the song *Riders On the Storm*. He would tell me it was a true story about these people that picked up this girl and murdered her and that hitchhiking...It’s just amazing how sick he was you know.

Being aware of that or fear of that. Yeah, you know or [getting] killed. You know or maybe one day you know, I’d just...And it was always kinda like an adrenaline rush you know like he would always you know, like he’d get an adrenaline rush out of scaring me and you know he’d always keep me at this height of like you know I was always in a state of arousal and you know adrenaline. You know just pumping through me. Um, and ah...I guess I kinda liked the adrenaline of him scaring me. I got used to it. You know, to where it just became [addictive].

[Drugs became] a recreational thing. And also I think too it would help me feel different. It would help me break out. You know, forget sexual abuse, forget um, forget
things in my life that I didn’t want to remember. Help me relax. I’ve always had a very hard time relaxing. So I’d use drugs to kinda alter my perceptions of life.

[The abuse altered my perception to the point where I experienced a flashback.]. Um, God that was scary. A very scary incident. Um, you know I’d never experienced anything like a flashback before and it was just because, you know, in a flashback you’re back there, you’re there again. Um, reliving the experience and it really scared me because I actually lost time, like physical time and I wasn’t aware of how long the flashback lasted or you know I was like five years old again and he was taking pictures of me. And I don’t know if I was yelling or what happened, but I remember after the flashback I left where I was and I just took off running and I ran for blocks and blocks and blocks. Very intense, and scary experience. Yeah, really intense.

Yeah, it’s funny now too, when I think of it. I ended up getting involved with “S.” who was in the drug Mafia. It’s almost the same thing. I mean “S.” didn’t physically abuse me or anything like that or you know, um, you know slap me around or anything. But um, at the same time I was in another relationship where I was afraid of this person. But when I met “S.” I didn’t know he was in the drug Mafia.

You know, so that was a real scary thing for me. I was afraid to death that he would find out that I was HIV positive. Because I thought, you know, that he’d have me killed or something like that. Um, but I was afraid to death and that even made me go into further denial about my status, for for longer. So um, and even years after we separated I was afraid that he’d find out I was HIV positive.

And he knew a lot of people. You know, um I was afraid of him for years after we separated. I was always afraid if he knew I was blabbing my mouth or something like that
that they'd come after me. Or if he found out that I was HIV positive that they'd come after me. So I lived in fear of him for years. And it's only probably been, you know the last four or five years that I haven't really been afraid of him.

And um, a large part of the reason I got HIV was because I wasn't assertive enough to be assertive enough with sex, to talk to and make someone use condoms. I remember when I was seventeen I was dating this guy and I talked to him about wearing condoms and using condoms and he got really mad, and he was like “oh no” and I didn't know at that time, like maybe that was an insult. Like maybe you weren't supposed to do that.

**Brent's Story**

I was always fearful as a kid. And uh, it's really difficult for me to remember safe stuff. There was very little safety in feelings. I was a loner. I was afraid of people. And uh, I was afraid of meeting new children, uh new friends. Afraid of girls and afraid of guys. I was introverted, afraid of people, and uh, um, afraid to leave the house. In a sense I guess my house was, was my only safety--my bedroom. But as soon as dad came home, no, I was afraid.

Um, I was afraid of him, because as kids we used to get blamed a lot for things that went missing, um things that got broken. Um they'd have a party at their place, or their house, and uh woke up in the morning and one of their bowling trophies was broken and uh, so dad gave us five minutes to think about it and he said “now one of you admit to doing it or I'm going to strap both of you.” And the truth was we had no idea why it
was broken. Maybe somebody from the night before knocked it off the T.V., uh maybe the dog knocked it off the T.V.. And so, I was afraid of my father.

And uh, uh the teasing I guess I was receptive to it because it was the type of behavior I was used to. If it wasn’t dad, it was my brother. And uh, I would just, my knees would give out on me. Uh, I do recall when I was six years old [my father] bought some boxing gloves and he wanted to show me how to box, and I just started to cry and cry and cry and I wouldn’t get up off the floor. He, he wanted to make a man out of his son and his son was just crying.

I would uh, I remember many times sitting in my room crying, and it was no reason, I hadn’t hurt myself, I hadn’t fallen down, nobody had beat me up or teased me. I just couldn’t take it anymore. [My mother] was my only source of security. [When my brother and I did fight] uh things were thrown. Anything within hands reach was thrown. Um I did most of the throwing because I was smaller and trying to protect myself. And uh, so vases, records or coat-hangers would fly through the air. And uh, by the time [my brother] was ten years old, George had realized that anybody’s house was better than our house. Um, so uh, by sixteen he was uh, hm working hm with jobs, schoolwork, dances, school committees, band classes, anything to be away from the house. And so he was never home.

[My cousins sexually abused me] and uh, I pulled up my bathing suit and ran to the beach. I couldn’t go to my mom, and I couldn’t go to my dad, and uh so I just started into the water and I started swimming. There was a raft uh, not to far from the beach, and I swam to the far side of the raft. And I just tried to avoid them, and stay away from
them. Norman came after me, the girls came after me. Again, I was scared that somebody was going to find out about [me having sex with my cousins].

[My cousin sexually abused me] twenty-five feet from our parents. That was uh, very very risky behavior. And the next day, um we were out playing at the beach and uh he asked me if I wanted to go into the house and play with each other’s private parts again. And I was like, I was really nervous, because there were so many people, and people constantly going in and out of the house. The danger part of it, doing something bad really excited me. Um, I remember that.

Um, I guess you might say that I’ve been raped repeatedly. [Recently I met a man] who was really twisted and bent and it was like “Oh, let’s see what you can do.” Um, and that lasted a couple of weeks, although it was interesting to see him operating at that level.[For] the last ten years [sex] had to be something destructive, something uh degrading, um or abusive.

Um, I was terrified [about experiencing my first gay bar]. I was twenty-one. I was terrified to go into a gay bar. There was this overwhelming fear that either the place was going to get busted by the police or uh I was going to get beaten up coming out of the bar or uh, just that something bad was going to happen.. [When I was arrested] it was actually very enjoyable. Um, I found the whole experience to be interesting [and] exciting.

I thought the police officers were all out of shape; they looked like Hell’s Angels gangs, with beards and um psychedelic T-shirts. They didn’t look anything like the police officers that I grew up with. I really wanted a cigarette badly and uh, um and there was like, there was these really sharp scissors sitting all around me and I’m like “don’t you
kids want to put those away? Aren’t you afraid that I might stab you?” [A policeman said to me] “I’m really surprised. Most people when they get to this point are crying, and you seem to be enjoying this” And I said “well, I am actually.” Um so my mug shot, you know I’ve got a nice smile on my face, and I’m showing my best side (laughs).

[After testing positive for HIV] I thought, who cares if I go bankrupt? Um, it doesn’t really matter. I racked up all my charge cards. Um, I uh, I thought “well, I can probably afford to make minimum payments on everything, and rack up about 14,000 dollars in debt.” I really wanted to die. Death was the only way out. Um, my life had been hell. And the thought of having to do this all over again, um, I just couldn’t take it. The thought of having to live this life again [was] the definition of hell. And um, I’m feeling um, at times like crying inside like, like that little boy lost in the department store.

**Carl’s Story**

Yeah, [my mother] was my protector. Um, yeah we were close and I depended upon her a lot for um, stability and um, I was very dependent on her for a long period of time. Um, I know that often and when I would have conflicts with my brother um, she would usually intervene and take care of me. Not very often did I ever feel that she would treat me unfairly.

[My parents were fighting] and I remember screaming out um, in a very uncontrolled manner I would say, to the point where I was in a completely panic stricken space and I thought that it was time to call the police or whatever and my mom concurred that. And then my mom told me to just get out of the house. So I went out of the house
and I went over to a friend's house and I stayed there that evening. And I remember after
being over at my friend's house I felt safer cause it was removed from the situation.

Um, I don't think I've ever been more hysterical or frightened in my life. (long
pause) I suppose I was very fearful of [my father] from that point forward... I would say I
was always ah, fearful of him after that. Um, as I mentioned before, there was always a
fear of the threat of violence from him. But yeah, I do remember being fearful of him a
lot of the time, even before that incident [but] that's, that's definitely the highest point of
that I would say. I mean I've had other vile episodes of things that were cause for fear,
but that was the pinnacle.

Um, I, I guess really it was, it was sort of an emotional release. I remember
screaming out very loudly. I remember doing that and I remember that it was a very
erratic scream as well. It was very uncontrolled. Pitch was sort of, went up and down
and I remember being really frightened. And I also, I also remember when I think about
it, feeling sort of pinned where I was, I was transfixed watching what was happening
around me.

Yeah, [I was] completely, completely overwhelmed. It was like oh, it was like a
shock wave that carried over me and sort of kept me sitting on the floor. So I was really
unable to do anything. I remember just watching, um, it wasn't as if I could sort of
intervene or that I tried to and made them stop. I don't remember that, I just remember
just being very, very frightened about the whole situation. I just remember being very
frightened by the whole situation, that [my father] was threatening her.

I remember me and both of my brothers staying at my uncle's house for a week
and I sort of learned later that I think it was because my mom was very much bruised. So
I don't know the level of the violence or exactly what happened and I know that they protected us from that so that we wouldn't see what was happening, or what had happened. I suppose because I was removed from the situation that, for the following week, I wasn't in that environment at all so I suppose that helped to subside anything that was, that I would have thought or remembered because I was completely removed from the situation. I had nothing to remind me of it directly every day, because it was a different environment and as much as I'd spent time at my aunt and uncle's it was very strange to be there in the middle of the week.

Yeah, I suppose I [was] really [self-reliant] because um, conflicts with my brother I would have to resolve myself. Um, most commonly I probably went over to a friend's house. I remember spending a lot of time with him after school. We used to, we used to hang out all the time so I would go over to his house. Um, (pause) so I never really liked spending a whole lot of time with [my brother].

Um, I also remember a big part of my childhood was spent reading comics um, it became my little sanctuary, my own little world where I could escape to and it was a break from whatever I was experiencing, or whatever was at home. I mean now, in a few years I'll be able to cash in on my collection I'm sure, but it was, it was what I needed to do to escape. It was my means of escape. I'd spend all of [my allowance], pretty much really [on comics].

There was, there were, there were very few things that I'd spend money on when I was a kid and that was, that was about it. Um, I suppose I'd spend a bit of money on junk food and stuff like other kids, but not as much. I'd spend more on comics. And I would want them, I would want them more than anything. I remember it was a big, big
deal for me. Usually on Sunday um, my aunt or my uncle or my brother, my eldest
brother when we were older, we would drive to this one corner store in the neighboring
town that had a great selection and I would come clean the rack. I would bring home
five, six, seven different issues. So there was a lot of that.

I also used to watch a lot of TV, a lot of TV, you know I [spent my] total
childhood after school in front of the TV...especially after my mom started working. I
would spend all of my time in front of the TV, um, if I wasn't out with friends I would
come home, make toast and sit and watch TV um, make dinner and then go sit and watch
TV. So I would watch it probably five, six hours from like, as soon as I went home to
school, from after school until I went to bed. So that was a big escape for me as well.

It was ok, um I would be able to get pretty lost within whatever was on TV, um,
to the point where I remember being very jarred whenever my father would come home
late and we would be afraid of what might transpire. So we would close the door to the
living room so that he could pass without seeing us and without us seeing him and hope
that he would pass and that it would be fine. And more often than not it was fine,
especially if my mom was in the room that was ok. I suppose, [I would] get immersed in,
in whatever. Immersed in um, reading or going to see friends or watching TV, whatever.
Just sort of detached myself from all of it I suppose.

I feel I guess, uh, enough of a detachment from [my family now]. I don't feel it's
unsafe for them to know [that I'm gay]. Um, yeah, I went to college and it wasn't, it was
in a bigger city and in the department I was in um, there were more, there were a few, not
many, openly gay guys. So, it sort of broadened my perspective and I, the first person
that I came out to was a close friend of mine that well, we developed a close friendship at
that point and he was very comfortable with it because when he grew up in high school, the friends that he hung out with were gay. Most of his friends were gay. So it was very comfortable with him. But he was very comfortable with it so I suppose it was because of that, that I finally realized that I would be pretty safe in telling him although I was very drunk at the time when I told him.

There was always a level of risk with sex, being enticing. It's probably caused me to [be] a lot more reckless um, in areas of sex because of what we spoke about before, with the incidents of, of, of trying to fondle people when they were asleep. Um, when I was playing, when I was fondling [them] I suppose (pause). Um, so I sort of proceeded and just sort of lied on the floor beside the couch where [someone] was trying to sleep. [I would pretend to be sleeping] but I could hear that it didn't sound realistic, because I could hear beat in my breath because it was so intense (long pause). That was obviously the way, that's always what I would do if, if there was a threat of being caught or murmur if someone was beginning to awake.

And I remember I was, whenever I would do that I would remember being really peaked. My awareness was incredibly peaked, my heart rate would be really, really high. Because there was a level of fear, being caught, it was very frightening. Um, to the point where later I remember having, I used to have a lot of casual sex in parks at night, um, that was very unsafe, but it was very thrilling.

I suppose yeah, there was, there was always, when I'd have sex in parks there was the level of arousal, which was having sex, and there was also the level of arousal of being able to (pause) all the risks involved. You know, it being dark, not being able to see what was happening, who was there and the threat of violence um. Um, [I was] very
thrilled by the risk of being caught [having sex in the public washrooms]. Um, that always heightened the experience. Ooh, yeah. I was from a small town, it was, it was really unheard of. There was, I couldn't feel safe doing that at all...yeah.

I would feel more safe [if I could please or take care of someone else] because I'd feel more in control of the situation. Um, I would know that I was contributing something good. (pause) (sigh) (whispering) I want to say no, that I wouldn't do that from this point forward. I think I have done that in my life. I mean it's clear, having contracted the virus that I've had a lot of unsafe sex. And, that the reason for that was to fulfill an empty need. Which comes down to that. So I mean, I guess, yes I, I have done that. I would like to think that I won't do that more. That I've, dealing with the issues surrounding that and I'm aware enough to be able to stop that chain of events.

Um, some friends I feel very safe with. Others I feel a little risky with because I know that based on past experiences we had both, well I shouldn't say both, when I think of a few different friends, I know that we a have a propensity to adventure into risky situations for the thrill of it. My partner makes me feel very safe. I feel very safe with him.

I remember being very nervous about [anal sex], very, sort of afraid. I guess it did fear, bring out fear for me probably because of what I'd experienced when I was young. Um, and then after I got the virus, that was even more of a fearful thing to do. There was more reason not to do that and [my partner] was very nervous about that. Um, and the, the worry of the condom breaking or whatever and him being infected with the virus as well. Um, so that's an ongoing sort of issue for me and it still can be at times, um.
Danger is, danger is doing anything worse or is doing, danger is doing anything that will potentially cause me harm, in any sort of realm: physically, emotionally. So safety would be the reverse of that. Um, doing things that are respectful of my needs; that are respectful of other's needs. That's probably it. That it's, it's, as long as, as long as there's a respect, a self respect, the respect of others, then I'm not putting myself at any sort of risky situation. Be it sexual, be it...physical, financial, whatever.

**Regard for Personal Health**

**Allan’s Story**

Uh, I'm just really realizing how--my mother’s dead--but just really realizing how ill my father is. I think he’s really ill, you know. Really messed up. Extremely messed up. Really ill mentally. You know. The more I think about it the sicker I realize [my abuser] is. Um, I think it would mostly help me to understand what happened and you know, what was going on for him. You know, it seems like there’s a lot of things that are unanswered.

Um, (long pause) I had a lot of really nervous activities like ticks when I was a child. You know, um, like having to touch everything I walked by, not people but objects or else something bad would happen. Or, um, sniffling all the time. Just real bad nervous habits when I was a child. I had a lot of suicide attempts and stuff when I was younger too, and you know it’s something that I wouldn’t repeat now. But I started attempting suicide when I was about um, probably about thirteen and I did it when I was thirteen,
probably around fifteen and then around nineteen. So there were three or four attempts and that but um, it’s not something that I would continue.

[It was a] very intense, and scary experience [when I experienced the sexual abuse flashback.] Yeah. Really intense, and then I kind of felt like “maybe I’m losing my mind.” And I wasn’t really, I didn’t know what exactly happened to me. I wasn’t at first aware, you know I had to kind of stop and make sense of it. You know, I didn’t know at that time that that was a flashback. I just thought “my God, what’s happening to me?”

I do a lot of thinking, you know. It’s not really hard [to discuss] ‘cause I do a lot of thinking and things make sense when I talk about it. But it’s not really... so hard for me to talk about now because I’ve talked about it for years now in therapy and worked through it and so that a lot of emotional stuff that was behind it, um, is gone you know. I mean there’s still emotion behind it, but I mean coming from a time when I couldn’t talk about it at all, to now where I can talk about it without getting too upset. Like, um, you know it’s easier. But I mean I’m just, it seems like as I talk about it I’m really starting to see things in patterns and you know, becoming aware of, more aware of what happened. It’s kind of like shedding light on a dark corner...yeah.

Um, so I think that I was infected with HIV when I was seventeen. Um, and so I would have been nineteen when I tested positive. I’d just turned nineteen. And, um, so that would have been around the end of 1985 when I tested positive for HIV. I’ve managed to stay healthy until this day. And that’s for, you know, a long time. That’s one thing I thought of too, which scared me for a long time was if I ever got sick with HIV-- and I think that’s one of the things that kept me healthy over the years (laughter)='cause I
was always afraid that if I got sick with HIV, I’d have to go live with [my father and stepmother].

[I was discharged from the U.S. Navy for being homosexual] and part of that was um, a mandatory HIV test. So um, uh, I remember going in for my HIV test and having the physical, um having the physical by the doctor and him saying “Oh, I’m sure you’re not going to be HIV but we have to take your blood, and we test your blood too.” because I had no physical symptoms. And he said, you know, “almost everyone with HIV at that point in time they believed that people had swollen lymph nodes and you know physical signs of it,” and um, I didn’t.

Brent’s Story

Um, I’d go home because I wanted to see my mother, who after the mid-seventies was starting to get ill from heart problems, phlebitis in the legs, uh nervous problems. And her health started to go downhill. And she was only fifty-seven years old. Um (pause) my mother used to be very very vibrant, outgoing, um very attractive. When she was younger she used to model. She’s uh, like her spirit was broken. She was gone. Her heart stopped beating in one of the chambers. And uh (lengthly pause) I just think it was her only way out. She did nothing in the last five years to strengthen herself, to do anything positive for herself. She wasn’t participating at all in her life or her future. She was uh burying it.

And uh, the news would come on about the gay plague, um AIDS, and [my mother] would just turn white. And uh, I had an HIV test when I was in Whitehorse and
on April 1st 1987 I tested positive. So I really think from my experiences that I picked up the HIV disease when I was in Victoria...having the gamut of unprotected sex, and uh, um when I got the news, the results, I was happy.

Um, my doctor cried when I told him I was positive--I’d gotten the news from the public health nurse. He suggested that I move to Vancouver or Edmonton--a place with a bigger hospital--because he didn’t know anything about the disease. And uh, I just took it all in stride, and I moved to Vancouver. And in 1987 I was very cautious about what kind of apartment I took. I made sure that it had elevators, because I was sure that I wouldn’t make it up the stairs. And you know, he told me that I probably only had a couple of years left.

And uh, I didn’t die; I didn’t get sick.. I had all these bills and work wasn’t going well and depression was overwhelming me. I had been clinically depressed since uh, I guess [I] was first diagnosed [with depression] in 1986 in Whitehorse. When I moved back to Vancouver in 1987 I was very lonely, depressed. And I was thinking that I was going to die....and uh, I just didn’t want to die alone. So um, [I] offered [a man] unconditional love if he’d take care of me. And uh, hold my hand when I died.

That was in 1990, and I thought that by 1992 surely I would be gone. It was, it was just a waiting game. And knowing that I was HIV-positive and by this time I was starting to watch my friends die. So uh, yeah I guess it was 1990, well I tried to set little goals for myself through working with my therapist, my psychiatrist. Look at some short term goals.

And uh, HIV therapies were um causing me nervous problems--confusion. Complications, um diarrhea, um abdominal cramps and pain. So there was so many
prescribed drugs and unprescribed drugs going through my system. One to wake me up, and one to put me to sleep, and one to cheer me up, one to take away the anxiety. I didn’t know who I was anymore.

And uh, um, [last] April I came down with pneumonia, and was admitted to the hospital. Uh, I got very very sick and uh, and when I came home out of the hospital I was still not well at all. I was sleeping most of the time. So uh, when I came to, [my partner] was just acting totally erratic, his behavior. Um, his sister whom I had talked to, she told me that he’s gone through therapy but the doctors keep throwing him out of therapy because um, he tells them what they want to hear. Um, makes no progress at all. And he continues to fabricate all of his experiences while he’s undergoing therapy. So they just give up on him, and tell him to get lost, ‘cause he’s not willing to make any improvements.

I was really hurting. Um, I moved into the [new] apartment on the 1st or on the 30th, and uh at that time I wasn’t aware that I was just at the beginning of experiencing a full herpes outbreak, um internally. And uh, I thought it was a hemorrhoid, and uh, then just experiencing fevers, body aches and pains, sweats, and I thought that was the flu. And uh, actually the symptoms started two days before my move, so uh, the move itself was quite tiring. And uh, it was the second day in the apartment and I was laying on the bed, and I was unable to move, racked in pain. Uh, headache, it was so painful that if death was an option it would have been gladly taken.

So uh, yeah one of the body’s great defences is that uh, well my mind started to go, and uh, the stresses in my life started to go with it. As long as I didn’t move, ‘cause when I moved the pain that uh the herpes infection [caused]. I had pain all throughout my
body. And uh, my skin felt like my whole body had been in a fire, like intense pain. And uh, it wasn’t until this Sunday, seven days later, that I realized that it was a herpes outbreak. All along I had the medication in my house; I could’ve taken it at any time.

But I was so busy with uh, [HIV service organizations], moving my furniture, packing, cleaning, decorating, and I burnt myself out. I couldn’t concentrate on any of those things. Those skills were beyond me. Um, I couldn’t wash dishes. I didn’t know how to cook. Um, I was in a new apartment and I didn’t know where anything was. Even today I still haven’t programmed my VCR. I used to be a whiz at doing stuff like that. Um, but uh it’s still a little to complicated. (pause).

In the past I would’ve called mom, but um (pause). And uh, [I] forgot that I’m mortal; forgot that I could get sick. Um, so uh, moderation, um uh, self-control, that’s when it comes into play. Uh, and then with my readings I started to discover that um, the way you die is very very important.
CHAPTER SIX

Thematic Analysis

Seven themes that were common to each of the co-researchers emerged through data analysis. These include *The Endurance of Alienation, Deprecation of Self, Yearning for Intimacy, The Experience of Repetitive Betrayal, The Resignation to Abuse, The Experience of Sexual Obsession* and *Safety Defined as Connection to Others*. Given that each of the co-researchers has tested positive for HIV, it was somewhat surprising that *The Experience of Health and Illness* was absent as a theme for Carl and seemed to be of far less concern to Allan and Carl than the other themes. There was a considerable degree of consistency in the meaning units comprising each theme across co-researchers. All themes have been reviewed and validated by the co-researchers as accurately capturing the essence of their experience.

The Experience of Alienation

A profound sense of alienation permeates the lives of the co-researchers. These men have experienced abandonment and neglect within their families, and rejection from the world at large. Without a sense of connection to others, the co-researchers report that they existed in a state of isolation. To some degree this has contributed to a sense of self-reliance; however, their feelings of estrangement are so powerful that ultimately these
men feel alienated from themselves, culminating in substance abuse, compulsive behaviour, suicidal ideation and attempts.

Each of the co-researchers reports that his father was very distant emotionally and was unavailable to him. According to Allan, his father would neglect the family while spending money on “booze and parties.” Brent states that

I just felt abandoned and pushed away, and that was sort of the end of whatever closeness I had with my father… He was afraid to hold me. He was afraid to touch me. He was afraid to show any affection or warmth.

He wouldn’t hug or hold me anymore.

These experiences are echoed in Carl’s observation that “he stopped being our father really, um he lived his own life and we were very separate from that.” Each of the father-son relationships recounted by the co-researchers is pervaded with the experience of rejection and expressed with resentful sentiments.

In contrast, the co-researchers’ relationships with their mothers are characterized by experiences of abandonment. For example, Allan reports, “I felt very abandoned…. I did, I felt like… she didn’t care enough, you know. Ah, my mother wasn’t really stable enough to be there for me a lot.” Brent and Carl experienced similar feelings of abandonment when their mothers began working. According to Brent, “My mother was always working. She started working when I was at the age of five. And uh, there was no supervision. Stuff where a parent should intervene.” Carl states in his recollection that:

I remember feeling a great sense of loss from her, ah, when she started working. I remember when I was, I remember when I was in grade three I remember looking up at the clock at ten to three and knowing that she was
leaving for work and that when I got home she wouldn’t be there. I remember feeling that loss.

While the abandonment co-researchers experienced with their mothers was painful, these experiences are recounted by them with a sense of compassion rather than resentment.

The experience of alienation was not limited to the confines of family life for the co-researchers. Allan remembers relocating to Canada and being automatically very different from other children….I, I didn’t fit in very well. I was even teased about being gay by about the age of nine by other kids. They could tell I was different. Yeah, I was feeling like a real outsider.

Brent felt that “Nobody wanted [him]; they didn’t want [him] at school; they didn’t want [him] at home.” Carl’s experience closely approximates that of Allan and Brent. He states “I never was viewed as very attractive at all; I was always very, very heavy. So I was always the fat kid, always um, cast aside in a way.” In all instances, it was extremely difficult for the co-researchers to connect meaningfully with others, and as a result they felt extremely isolated in their worlds.

The sense of isolation that the co-researchers experienced fostered feelings of extreme loneliness. Allan indicates, “…there was no one at home or anyone in my life that I could depend on but myself pretty much, you know throughout my life.” While this suggests that Allan was able to develop a sense of self-reliance, he goes on to observe that “[I was] really feeling like an outsider. Like no one really cared what happened with my life, or, or about me.” Like Allan, Brent recalls
I was always usually just left alone. Well, my life was so isolated from everyone else. Um, the majority of my influences came from television....So I would just, I would introvert, go way deep inside, uh in an area where nobody could hurt me. I was in my own world.

Carl reiterates these experiences as he recalls, “I was always sort of outcast that way.” Feeling like outsiders, each of the co-researchers turned to himself to find connection and meaning, and this encounter proved to be extremely challenging.

There was at best a minimal amount of nurturing and acceptance in the early relationships the co-researchers experienced with others. In many ways, the alienation that they had experienced in their relationships with others was duplicated when the co-researchers attempted to relate to themselves. Allan began attempting suicide at the age of thirteen, and this continued until he was nineteen years old. Brent began contemplating suicide at the age of eight and he recalls

...picking up an, um carving knife in the kitchen and looking at it and just wondering where I would push it through, where my heart was and stuff.

And uh, so I was gathering information at that age so that if I wanted to do it, how would I do it.

Both Allan and Brent were as alienated from themselves as they were from others, and in a sense were ready to abandon themselves through suicide.

This sense of self-alienation is also evident in the sexually compulsive behavior the co-researchers often find themselves engaging in. Each of the co-researchers has or continues to engage in this behaviour even though they regard it as abhorrent. This is illustrated in Carl’s acknowledgement that
In ways, it’s odd, but I, I know that there have been a few times where even when I’m engaging in sex and I know I’m not having a good time and I know I’m repulsed I can’t stop and I can’t say no. Can’t stop and say I’m not having a good time. Why am I doing this? Maybe because they will abandon me.

Although Carl isn’t certain that a fear of abandonment drives his behaviour, both Allan and Brent concur with this insight. Allan’s concern is that “he wouldn’t be my friend anymore, we wouldn’t hang out anymore if I didn’t do what I was told.” In Brent’s experience, “If anyone wanted to sleep with me it was rewarding. If anyone wanted me it was rewarding. But that was better than no contact, no touch,…Just the fact that someone wanted me.” The insights regarding this theme that co-researchers have chosen to share suggest that they are willing to neglect their own needs and in a sense abandon themselves so that others will not abandon them.

The Deprecation of Self

The manner in which the co-researchers view themselves determines to a large extent the way in which they experience their worlds. Although they have all striven to overcome extreme adversity, there is a pervasive sense of inferiority influencing these men’s lives. Each of the co-researchers has endured humiliation and regret in order to satisfy the needs and demands of others. At times they have adopted the distorted view others have of them as an alternative to confrontation. This strategy, while seemingly adaptive at the time, has served to compromise the co-researchers’ sense of integrity and
self-worth. This has proven to be problematic when they are then called upon to assert
themselves or assess their situation, as a firm sense of purpose or identity is no longer
possessed by them.

The co-researchers are able to acknowledge the adversity they have overcome and
progress they feel they have made in their development. For instance, Allan thinks
“...there’s a lot of people that didn’t have this hard a life as I did that are a lot worse off
now, you know.” Brent conveys that his own development began when “I started to
change my ideas about life. What I was looking for. Um, I started to go down all the
different avenues. I was finding enlightenment for the first time; that there were alternate
realities from the one I knew of.” Carl expresses this sense of assertion and self-
discovery when he states “I want something for me now. So I’m not gonna have sex with
you anymore. I’m gonna have sex with someone I’m attracted to.” These seemingly
disparate assertions illustrate the ability of the co-researchers to acknowledge their
capabilities and self-worth.

The co-researchers are able to acknowledge their achievements, but doubt their
ability to maintain such a level of success. Any sense of accomplishment that they have
experienced is tempered and often eclipsed by their past, thereby compromising the sense
of efficacy the co-researchers may have fostered within themselves. This is exemplified
in a recent event that undermined Carl’s sense of self. He recalls “Even a few weeks ago
I let myself do that again and I was really shocked by it. And I was bothered by it for
days. That I’d, that I’d had sex with this person that I found so repulsive. Yet I persisted
and I didn’t quite understand why.” Brent recognizes that he is “very well respected by a
number of people” but concedes “it’s a difficult path to follow because of the one I’ve
been on.” He goes on to state “I’ve learned that by saying I’m never going to do this again, it only sets you up for failure.” After serving the needs of others for most of his life, Allan cautiously hopes “eventually in my life you know I will have someone there that I can rely on and stuff.” The expectancy of failure and disappointment that the co-researchers anticipate engenders at best a guarded sense of optimism, and this makes it extremely difficult for them to envision or commit to a better future for themselves.

The co-researchers find it extremely difficult to relate to others with a sense of congruency, and this has proven to be problematic when they are called upon to assess themselves or their situation. They often censor themselves or adopt the distorted view others have of them in order to avoid confrontation or gain acceptance. In Allan’s estimation, his parents developed “a lot of really wacky ideas” through their involvement with the Church of Scientology, but he “would have to go along with it—with their ideas and that because I was under them.” Allan’s stepmother attempted to have him declared a “suppressive” or evil person through the Church of Scientology, and the perpetrator of his sexual abuse went to considerable lengths to convince Allan that he was a “bad” person. In Allan’s estimation of himself he states “You know, I always had to pretend, you know, that I was a really good person.” Allan adopted the distorted views others had of him, and this compromised his sense of integrity.

Brent also compromised himself in order to avoid confrontation and gain acceptance. Brent believed that he was “a big disappointment to his father” and felt that “there wasn’t something quite right about Brent.” Brent then began to live his life for others. His father instilled in him the belief that “if you want to be a real man, then you’ve got to do something you don’t want to do.” In an attempt to gain his father’s
acceptance Brent did what he didn’t want to do repeatedly. He was “engaged to a woman for a while,” but sincerity was very important to Brent, and the engagement was subsequently called off. The need to compromise himself was not so easily staid. Brent recalls returning home at night and “feeling so ashamed of uh, my sexual behaviour and I couldn’t shower myself enough. [I] couldn’t use enough soap.” This escalated to the point where Brent “really didn’t know who [he] was anymore.” The needs and expectancies of others took precedence over his own sense of self.

The priority Carl placed on the needs and expectancies of others also compromised his sense of self. Carl’s attempts to please others left him with feelings of “emptiness” and self-loathing. According to Carl, “there were times when I would feel really, um disgusted with myself because there were times when I would have sex with people or do things with people that I really didn’t want to do.” Carl derived a sense of purpose as he gave of himself to others, but his experience of self-worth was greatly diminished in the aftermath of those efforts. As he observes, “It was like after the dust would settle, after the elation of it all you would feel very empty.” Carl’s reference to himself in the second person illustrates the level of detachment he experiences in his attempt to connect with others.

For each of the co-researchers, connecting with others entails conceding to them. As a result, the co-researchers engage in self-deprecating behaviours that further diminish their sense of worth. As they strive to appease others the co-researchers neglect themselves. According to Allan,

I think in some ways [my experiences] made me a kind of “pleaser,”

where I’d always try and please people. You know, I’d always try and
give people what they wanted. I think I kind of learned that from a young age. You know, as not to worry about my own um, my own issues and what I needed, but worrying about what other people wanted and expected from me.

Brent’s experience is very similar to Allan’s, and he reports that he “was always the first one to make sandwiches or tea or soup or dinner and bringing wine and flowers and um, I was caring about the other person.” Although the co-researchers often went to extraordinary measures to placate others and gain their acceptance, there is always an underlying sense that they have never done enough.

The belief that they could never do enough to warrant the attention and concern of others has seriously undermined the self-esteem of the co-researchers. Their perception that they must always do more in the service of others has instilled in them a sense that they are flawed or inadequate. Allan wonders why “there is no one really there for [him]” when he has “been there for a lot of people.” Brent experiences panic attacks and is overwhelmed by his insecurities “just because other people are so comfortable and uh, I’m at a loss as to what to do.” Carl believes that his inability to assert himself brings up “awkward feelings” that cause him to avoid confrontation. The inability of others to respect and nurture the co-researchers is interpreted by them to mean that they are unworthy of receiving respect and nurturance.

In order to reconcile their own needs with the demands of others, the co-researchers retreat into a realm of fantasy. Allan claims that “a lot of the time [he] would just live in a fantasy world; a world that [he] created.” In his youth, Brent believed that cartoons were reality and that was “the kind of perception [he] had on what life was like.”
Carl was often ridiculed by his family about the amount of money he would spend on comics. The co-researchers’ preoccupation with fantasy mimics the inability of their families to acknowledge truth and address the often harsh reality of their existence. This dynamic is now present in the co-researchers’ adult lives, leaving them vulnerable to exploitation and manipulation.

The co-researchers long for meaningful and loving relationships with others. This yearning and the fantasies generated by it have compelled the co-researchers to place themselves at considerable risk. Brent shares a recent experience that exemplifies the manner in which fantasy can place one in a dangerous reality. He was deceived by a lover and attributes his vulnerability to the fact that “he told me things I wanted to hear. He uh, made me fantasize. He gave me the opportunity to dream and desire and think about my future.” It wasn’t until Brent’s health had deteriorated to a critical level that he began to re-evaluate his situation and realized that “he was probably trying to kill me.” Carl’s fantasy of finding a loving relationship compelled him to engage in numerous episodes of anonymous sex, and it was only recently that he began “a mourning process because it was the death of a façade” or fantasy that he had entertained through most of his life.

The failure of these fantasies to materialize prompt the co-researchers to engage in other behaviors that modify their perception of reality.

Allan, Brent and Carl have all engaged or continue to engage in various forms of substance abuse. According to Allan “I still smoke pot and drink booze and stuff like that.” “Stuff like that” has most recently taken the form of intravenous cocaine use. Brent uses alcohol minimally, and ingests hallucinogens for “spiritual reasons.” He uses amphetamines and derivatives to get him through the “bumps” in a day. Carl is an avid
user of marijuana for both medicinal and recreational pursuits. All of the co-researchers report that they use these drugs in order to have sex, suggesting that the world they are experiencing is decidedly removed from their fantasy.

**Yearning for Intimacy**

Each of these men's family of origin is characterized by violence, inadequate communication patterns and inconsistent parenting styles. Any bonding the co-researchers were able to experience within their families was tenuous at best. Without healthy role models, the co-researchers found their interpersonal relationships to be confusing and at times threatening. As their sense of loneliness intensified, the co-researchers became consumed with their efforts to establish meaningful relationships with others. Often, the need for friendship and intimacy took precedence over any other aspect of the co-researchers' wellbeing.

The co-researchers report that interpersonal relationships within their families were chaotic and unpredictable. In Allan's estimation of his family he discloses "Um, well there was a lot of problems in the family. Um, you know my parents I think, didn't get along very well and they were fighting a lot." Brent believes "the dynamics of [his] family were missing, because [his parents] didn't love each other. The two of them were just staring at each other not knowing what to do with each other. [His mother] asked for a divorce from [his] father before and he said no God damned way, nobody divorces a Patterson. You're with me until you go." Even though Carl was removed from the family home due to domestic violence, he reports, "[My parents] wouldn't fight, they wouldn't
smack each other, they really wouldn’t do much of that” [italics added]. These marital difficulties compromised the co-researchers’ relationships with their parents.

The relationships between the co-researchers and their parents were inconsistent and at times hostile. According to Allan, his father “spoiled” him and his mother “wasn’t a good enough disciplinarian, and she, she didn’t have the resources herself....So she didn’t really have a home—a sturdy home for [him] to live with her.” Despite these circumstances, Allan’s parents “had a lot of custody battles over who would get custody of [him].” Brent describes his mother as “his only saving grace,” but has a decidedly different opinion of his father. Brent spent years trying to impress his father, but “realized that somewhere along the line [he’d] given up on [his] life and was living [his] life for [his] dad. And uh, and then [he] really started to resent [his father].” Similarly, Carl reports that “there are emotional things that [he] received from [his family] that are dangerous to [his] well-being....It’s hard to get past (pause) what they believe [he] should be doing with his life.” Marital disputes and emotional discord within the co-researchers’ families have made it extremely difficult, if not impossible, for the co-researchers’ parents to relate to them in a consistent and unified manner.

The manner in which the co-researchers’ parents relate to their other children is also inconsistent, further impacting the relationships the co-researchers have with their siblings. According to Allan, his siblings “had kind of a tendency to think that [he] was kind of spoiled, and um, you know, felt like he needed more discipline and they weren’t really close to him, not really.” In contrast, Brent feels that his parents—particularly his father-- were far more supportive of his brother, George. In Brent’s view, his father “was really excited and proud of George because George could do anything basically.”
However, his father “couldn’t have cared less if [Brent] was there or not. All [he] was interested in was his job.” Carl supposes that “in much the same way that [his] dad would belittle [his mom], [his brother would belittle him] in front of his friends.” Inconsistency in the relationships the co-researchers’ parents have had with their children has engendered feelings of animosity and jealousy between the co-researchers and their siblings.

Emotional strife within their families forced the co-researchers to seek out loving relationships elsewhere. However, with such limited and often distorted exposure to loving relationships within their families, the co-researchers experienced a great deal of difficulty negotiating loving relationships for themselves. Allan maintains that he has “had a sexual history almost all [his life].” Allan’s sexual history began at age four when he turned to Peter for the attention he was not receiving at home. He believes that this has made him “very subservient to people.” Brent recognizes that

Most of [his] sexual encounters were, were out of a great need of love on [his] part. People tell [him] that one of [his] biggest problems is that when [he] meets somebody it’s really hard for [him] to have sex with them because he wants to make love. And uh, [he doesn’t] know how to communicate or inter-relate with people on a non-sexual level. Because all [his] life it’s been sexual....It’s just been like people communicate their needs and then [he] plays it back. And he never had the chance to experience pleasure.

Like Allan and Brent, Carl has also found it difficult to establish the parameters of a loving relationship. In his recollection of an incident involving sex with another man in a
public washroom, Carl realizes that he too was “looking for love in all the wrong places.” Carl believes that “[He] was just looking for any sort of attention...[and] love was much on his mind too that way, ‘cause he did feel lonely....Um, it was just yet another need or desire that he had to fill somehow.” The co-researchers’ limited and often distorted experience of loving relationships confounds for them the distinction between love and sex. As a result, they have been dissatisfied in their efforts to establish intimacy and their need for love and meaning within their relationships remains unfulfilled.

Even when the co-researchers’ needs are apparently being met in a relationship, they report that their involvement with others harbored unforeseen and potentially dangerous consequences. When Allan was nineteen he entered a relationship with a man in the “drug Mafia” They were partners for “about a year and a half” and during that time Allan felt that “[he] knew [his partner] really cared about [him] and [he] felt like, you know, he wouldn’t harm me.” Allan later feared for his life when his relationship with this man ended. Brent also found himself in a relationship with a man that he describes as “very very happy. He was warm and intimate. He was very very loving. He knew how to hold and how to kiss me, how to make love to me.” It wasn’t until the relationship began to dissolve that Brent discovered,

...there were warrants out for his arrest. He’d um, had a criminal record as long as your arm. Um, his last partner died a mysterious death, um a drug overdose. He wanted me to put my life insurance in his name. Um, I really think that he was planning on killing me (tears).

For Allan and Brent, their desire for intimacy has left them vulnerable to potentially violent and life-threatening circumstances. Carl has not yet been threatened with lethal
violence in his relationships, but like Allan and Brent, he has contracted a life-threatening
and to date terminal illness in his endeavors to establish a loving relationship with
someone else. Each of the co-researchers reports that he is currently involved in a less-
than-fulfilling relationship, and this alternative is at present more appealing than living or
dying alone.

**The Experience of Repetitive Betrayal**

The co-researchers report experiencing an overwhelming sense of betrayal in their
lives. Secrecy was relied on as a mechanism to cope with the dysfunctional dynamics of
family life. Truth was left unspoken while superficial appearances often belied a
threatening and dangerous reality. Unable to trust others, these men eventually began to
doubt themselves. The legacy of this being that these men are extremely vulnerable to
exploitation and manipulation.

Deception is the most consistent and enduring aspect of the co-researchers' life
experiences. In childhood, the co-researchers were deceived by family members and this
prevailed into their adult lives with others. In Carl's estimation, it is the secrets the family
keeps that have been most damaging to his sense of well-being. He states:

The secrets they keep, and the secrets... even more so than the things they
say to me. 'Cause the, the things I find most damaging are the things that
they clearly won't say to me or avoid saying to me. Or when I bring them
up, they avoid them.
Deception was also entrenched in Brent’s family. Brent believes that “[his] father’s pretty well entire life was an act, and [his] mother’s life again was much the same.” According to Brent, “it’s a weird feeling when you think that your whole life or existence is part of someone else’s fabrication of an alternate reality. The most frustrating part of it was that none of it made sense.” In Allan’s family, any attempt to make sense of a situation was thwarted by the excessive demands of his father. Allan’s father kept him “really busy, like a slave driver...[Allan’s] dad kept [Allan] so busy doing chores for him that [he] had very little time to think about [his] problems.” As a result, Allan would “blank a lot of things out” in order to cope.

To varying degrees, deception was employed in the co-researchers families as a means to manipulate and exploit them. Allan acknowledges that his father is “very manipulative [and] very controlling.” In Allan’s estimation, his parents “wanted [him] to be around them for their own security and not necessarily what was best for him.” His parents used him as a “weapon against each other.” Like Allan, Brent also feels used by his family. Brent thinks that his father used his marriage and children as a “vehicle for promotions through the R.C.M.P.” He is of the opinion that his father would not have made the same career advances as a single gay male. Carl was also manipulated and exploited within his family, but in his case it was an older brother who used him. According to Carl, his brother used him as a “pawn” to engage in “subversive things.” This was interpreted by Carl as a form of “camaraderie” that required him to remain secretive about their exploits. It also implied a level of complicity that rendered Carl more vulnerable to exploitation.
Carl was deceived and exploited by his brother in other ways as well. When Carl was seven years old, his brother began to have sex with him. Carl’s brother convinced him that the sexual abuse “was like this secretive thing but was kind of fun and secretive uh, and then it became more than that in a way....and he sort of convinced me that it was O.K. and that it felt good and, and that was fine.” This confused Carl and his confusion was intensified when his brother later decided that it was “wrong” and “physically dirty” to have sex with him.

Carl was still of the opinion that the sexual relationship he had with his brother was a “special” one and he tried to recapture that relationship by fondling his brother as his brother slept. This behaviour escalated, and Carl began fondling friends and acquaintances while they slept. In desperation, Carl eventually began to enter his father’s bed, and he would penetrate his sleeping father with the hope that their relationship could be as “special” as the one he had had with his brother. Carl believes that his father remained asleep when this would occur. Carl’s brother deceived him and so thoroughly exploited his need for affection that Carl eventually adopted his brother’s deceptive tactics.

Allan was also deceived and manipulated by the perpetrator of his sexual abuse. He describes his abuser as “an extremely manipulating, evil person.” Allan’s abuser would coerce him to engage in activities such as theft in order to convince him that he “was a really bad child.” When Allan was sexually abused, it was perpetrated under the auspices of “helping [him] out by showing [him] adult things.” Allan had already experienced betrayal within his family, and did not feel that they would support him if he disclosed the abuse. In Allan’s view, “He’d be the only one around and I think if I did go
to someone, you know, like who would my family believe—him or me first.” Rather than disclose the abuse, Allan adapted and became “like him [and] just as bad as him.” Allan was deceived, and by honoring the secrecy of his abuse he developed a sense of complicity in its enactment.

The sense of complicity the co-researchers experienced with the perpetrators of their abuse instilled in them a sense of dishonor that later allowed them to manipulate others. Even though Carl is “very obsessed with being honest about things” he supposes that his ability to be dishonest is “something that [he] learned from his older brother.” Brent values “trust, intimacy [and] love” above all else, but maintained relationships that he describes as “a fraud.” Allan would not disclose to sexual liaisons or long-term partners that he was HIV-positive. The co-researchers held in high esteem those who deceived and manipulated them, and this allowed them to utilize the methods of their deception without compromising their integrity. Apparently, imitation is the greatest form of flattery.

The co-researchers’ ability to utilize deceitful methods—either consciously or unconsciously--does not discount the ability of others to use those methods against them. This is perhaps best exemplified in Brent’s relationship with Peter. Brent believed in and trusted all that Peter seemingly had to offer. Even though circumstances suggested otherwise, Brent’s need for affection and affirmation precluded his intuition regarding Peter. It was not until circumstances became untenable that Brent was able to address the reality of his relationship. Brent learned through Peter’s family members that “Peter has been treated repeatedly for living in a world that he fabricates minute by minute.” As a result, Brent finds that “…it’s really hard for [him] to feel safe with anybody now.” Carl
and Allan also have difficulty trusting others, and in part this is due to the reception of their disclosure of truth.

Allan, Brent and Carl have all encountered denial when they attempted to disclose the truth of their experiences. Their attempts to be honest dispute the co-researcher's complicity, but the denial of their confidants serves to implicate them and perpetuate their vulnerability to exploitation. Allan’s certainty that his family wouldn’t believe him made it extremely difficult for him to disclose his abuse. Allan’s brother remains “in really strong denial about it” and has only recently been able to concede “maybe Allan it did happen to you, but I don’t really think he did anything to my kids.” When Brent confronted his father about his experiences, his father “didn’t remember any of it. You know, it was like get on with your life, it’s just the past.” Carl’s family avoids issues that he attempts to bring up with them. The co-researchers were unable to secure a receptive audience to hear their stories and validate their experiences, leaving them in states of confusion and self-doubt.

The betrayal experienced by the co-researchers confused them and called into question their recollection of events. In response to this, the co-researchers began to employ denial in their own lives. This is perhaps most striking in the following account in which Allan discusses his HIV status:

So I denied it, and um ended up going into denial for years about my HIV status. Um, [denial] means that um I didn’t disclose to partners that I was HIV. Um, that um, my denial was so strong at times I didn’t even remember that I was HIV. *Um, I don’t worry so much about getting HIV now* [italics added]...
Brent also employed denial as a coping strategy, and as a result “[he] didn’t remember lots of things that happened.” Typically, this would occur when Brent engaged in sexual activity. Like Brent, Carl would also employ denial as a strategy while engaging in questionable sexual activity. According to Carl, he remembers “just being very still and just trying to almost disappear and pretend that [he] wasn’t there, that [he] hadn’t done what [he] had just done.” The individuals who betrayed and exploited the co-researchers were unwilling to take responsibility for their actions, and eventually the co-researchers were unable to take responsibility for themselves.

**The Resignation to Abuse**

Sexual abuse rarely occurs in isolation. The co-researchers have experienced severe physical and emotional trauma in addition to abuse that is typically categorized as sexual. In their hunger for affection and validation, any attention—no matter how damaging—was viewed as preferable to neglect by them. For these men, the essential and valid needs for nurturance and intimacy were distorted and reified in acts of emotional, physical and sexual abuse. The inability of their caregivers to fulfill these needs appropriately was experienced by the co-researchers as their unworthiness to have those needs met. Boundaries have become obscured for these men; the distinction between intimacy and sex has become less than clear for the co-researchers. Taking personal responsibility for their abuse, these men now abuse themselves with substances and sexual practices that are considered “unsafe.”
The co-researchers witnessed and were victims of domestic violence within their families; they were traumatized by both. Allan recalls that his "parents were fighting a lot. Like severe fights. Like beating each other over the head with frying pans. [They were] very physically abusive towards each other." Carl remembers a violent incident that occurred between his parents that he supposes "scarred" him permanently. The intensity of this episode escalated to the point "where it made [Carl] hysterical." Brent does not recall specific episodes of domestic violence occurring between his parents, but he does recall an incident that occurred between his father and brother that proved to be noteworthy. Brent had been engaged in a disagreement with his brother that his father deemed necessary of intervention. The intervention Brent’s father decided to employ entailed lifting the brothers by the hair, slamming their heads together and propelling them into their bedrooms using their hair as a fulcrum. Brent’s recount of this episode was emotionally trying for him, but in his experience it wasn’t until his father “just started punching” his brother that the extent of abuse was realized by Brent. The co-researchers were all provided with evidence ample enough for them to question their own security within their families.

The co-researchers were not only witnesses to abuse, they were also recipients of it. Allan is “amazed” that he endured as much emotional and physical abuse as he did in addition to the sexual abuse levied upon him. This is depicted in the following statement Allan makes regarding his childhood:

It’s funny too, you know I’m talking about it and just realizing how terrible it was. When I think now I think a lot of it, you know, there was such abusive stuff too, a lot of sexual abuse, but a lot of it was you know,
mental and emotional abuse and physical abuse as well. You know, it’s just amazing how terrible my childhood was when I think about it.

The extent of abuse the co-researchers experienced within their families is also recalled by Brent and Carl. Brent believes that his brother’s “main source of enjoyment was teasing [him], beating [him up].” Carl was also tormented by an older brother. Not only did Carl observe his brother being “manhandled” by his father, he was also subjected to “really awful things” by his brother that eroded his self-esteem.

The co-researchers were recipients of the abuse they had witnessed, albeit in different forms. Allan recalls that the person who abused him sexually “kept [him] under his control. And he was very good at just hurting [him] enough physically, like in ways that wouldn’t show or leave bruises or things like that.” When Brent was abused by his brother, “[his brother] never left bruises, but uh, psychological scars.” Carl “used to fight a lot” with his brother and resented him “because he always bullied [Carl], always.”

Allan, Brent and Carl were subjected to acts of physical violence repeatedly, and this instilled in them a sense of vulnerability and insecurity.

The co-researchers were also subjected to severe forms of emotional abuse. These men were all traumatized by their fathers’ emotive volatility. Allan’s father used “his anger as a real manipulative tool.” Allan’s stepmother was also unrelenting, and “felt like she had to break [him] or she had to change [him] from the way [he] was.” Brent’s father unpredictably and explosively vented his emotions and as an adjunct, employed corporal punishment on his sons “for not telling the truth, [even though they did not know what the truth was].” Carl’s father “was a man who always, um, who’s temper would flare to a ridiculous degree where he would be gritting his teeth and swearing, um really
uncontrollably.” The co-researchers lived with a continual expectation of reproach, but were never certain of the infractions that would provoke such a response.

The uncertainty that the co-researchers experienced under the guise of discipline extended beyond the reproach of their caregivers. In their attempts to be perceived as adequate, the co-researchers tolerated and at times invited the excessive and inappropriate demands of others. The following account of Brent’s experience exemplifies this:

I wanted to shock people sexually. And [sex] was, for me I felt that I was being strong and brave. It’s like I’m really strong, you can do anything to me, you can’t hurt me. Um, and I don’t know why. It just went that way. I felt that I was brave and I was going to be a teacher or a guinea pig. Um, but I never understood how that really worked because I never felt stronger; I always felt a loss.

The “loss” experienced by Brent is by no means exclusive; Allan and Carl have also endured the anguish entailed in such a compromise. Allan portrays himself as someone capable of the exploits engaged in by the perpetrator of his abuse. Carl also deems himself capable of the behavior demonstrated by his abuser, but extends the limits of his capabilities by noting that “[he] wouldn’t get caught.” As the co-researchers compromise themselves in order to accommodate their abuse, their sense of self is denigrated and distorted.

The co-researchers’ sense of self is most fully distorted by their sexual abuse. Their needs for love and affection are acknowledged but used against them for the benefit of those who would exploit them sexually. Allan was four years old when his neighbor
began to sexually abuse him, and this continued for five years. During this time he was also sexually abused by a “babysitter.” When Allan was fifteen, a man “kinda raped [him] in a spa.” Allan is amazed by “how terrible [his] childhood was when [he] thinks about it.” Brent was “seven or eight” when he was sexually abused by his cousin. He describes this as a “pinnacle point” after which “everything started to get bad.” Brent “wanted to be loved so badly, and uh, instead [he] was used repeatedly… Um, they get their rocks off and feel wildly satisfied and [he’s] just left there damaged.” Like Allan and Brent, Carl “remembers feeling so traumatized by the whole experience. The pain of the, the memory of the pain of it was distressing.”

In order to alleviate their distress and painful memories, the co-researchers use and abuse substances. Allan began “medicating [himself]” as a teenager, and has since “done just about every drug there is.” Brent has used “magic mushrooms and acid for spiritual reasons,” as well as “crystal meth” and “ecstasy” for sexual purposes. Carl is an avid and regular user of marijuana. All three co-researchers tend to put themselves in potentially abusive and risky situations when under the influence of these substances, but as Brent points out, “[and] then the drugs would wear off and I couldn’t live with myself for what I had done.”

The Experience of Sexual Obsession

The co-researchers were indoctrinated at an early age to equate sex with attention and affection. These individuals were forced to prematurely confront physically and psychologically an aspect of themselves that they were scarcely able to understand or
accept. The fact that these experiences were invasive and misunderstood by the co-researchers further exacerbates the harm caused by their occurrence. Intimidation and coercion have been inextricably linked to sexuality in the lives of these men. This combined with the stigma attached to homosexuality in this culture has culminated in the experience of sexual obsession for the co-researchers.

The co-researchers have encountered great degrees of difficulty coming to terms with their sexuality. Allan reports that he was aware of his sexual orientation from “about the age of five or six;” he was introduced to sex at the age of four. Brent illustrates the difficulty he experienced coming to terms with his sexuality in the following passage:

I always thought (tears) um I had uh, by the time that I’d figured out that I was gay which was probably around fourteen or fifteen years old. This was more so through conversations, through high school chatter, *he’s gay, he’s not, he’s gay, he’s not* than in investigating what gay is and seeing boys in the shower and stuff, realizing that that excited me and uh, so from about the age of fourteen my entire life was a façade. I had a couple of “feelies” when I was younger with girls but I was terrified. I didn’t even know the (pause) um location of the genital areas. Um, um I was scared that I would be sticking my finger where it shouldn’t be, you know (laughter)?

It’s not surprising that Brent struggled with his sexual orientation, given the fact that both his parents were closeted homosexuals. Carl continues to struggle with his sexuality. According to him “It, it takes years. I mean, there’s still members of my family I’m not out to yet and some friends I don’t tell as well....” In the past, Carl’s family insisted that
he keep his sexual orientation—and HIV status—hidden. It has only been recently that Carl has become determined to “not pretend [he] isn’t a fag anymore.” All of the co-researchers have encountered a considerable amount of pressure within their families to suppress their identity as gay men.

The insistence the co-researchers encountered within their families regarding a suppression of their sexuality confused and disempowered them. Although Allan’s “sexual history started when [he] was four,” it wasn’t until he was seventeen that he “really started dating men and stuff.” The “stuff” Allan makes reference to entails “hustling on the streets.” He later worked as an escort when he was in his early twenties, but “all of that was safe sex.” According to Brent he “began to obsess on sex, and [he] couldn’t get enough and um, so [he] went from the bars to the parks and um, bathrooms to um anywhere and um, anything goes.” Carl reports a similar dynamic in his experience when he states

that would transpire further into having sex, sex in washrooms which I further explored after that. After parks then came washrooms and that became an ongoing obsession for a long period of time. A very long period of time—years.

The co-researchers pursued sex unrelentingly in an attempt to have their needs for affection and companionship fulfilled. These needs were rarely if ever fulfilled in these relationships, and the co-researchers—behaving under the distorted premise that sex was equatable with love—escalated their sexual behavior until it became compulsive and life threatening.
The damage inflicted on the lives of the co-researchers by their sexual behavior has reached such an extent that Brent reports “It’s hard for [him] to have sex. Um, [he’s] had so much sex in the past, [he] doesn’t want to have sex anymore. He’d, for the most part [he] doesn’t enjoy having sex. Sex turns him off.” Allan has also experienced a decline in his sexual interest; he is both fearful of and attracted to men. The “flashback” he experienced in a local bath house makes the prospect of anonymous sex problematic for him. According to Carl “It’s always a fearful thing...he’s been able to [engage in anal sex] since then with other folks, um, but [he’s] always very, very cautious about that.” After encountering numerous disappointments sexually, the co-researchers are now suspect of their sexual liaisons and the persons willing to engage them in their pursuits.

Safety Defined as Connection to Others

Safety can best be defined for the co-researchers as a connection with others. This connection and sense of wellbeing that the co-researchers experience through their connection with others is often achieved with detrimental consequences. When connections can not be established or maintained, the co-researchers escape into realms of fantasy, substance abuse or literal removal from the situation. There is also a sense of comfort to be found in the familiar with these men, and each of the co-researchers reports that there was an enjoyable aspect to the arousal and excitement they experienced when they were in dangerous or abusive situations. In order to recapture the intensity of these experiences, the co-researchers would repeatedly place themselves in dangerous situations. Safety entails a dangerous compromise in the lives of these men.
The co-researchers found it difficult to identify times or situations in their lives when they felt particularly safe. Brent states that he “was always fearful as a kid. And uh, it’s really difficult for [him] to remember safe stuff.” Allan spent a substantial portion of his youth running away. As Allan describes it, “It was neat to get away from [his] parents. And [he] liked it. [He] liked being away from [his] parents and their, their you know craziness.” Carl felt unsafe in his home, and stayed with relatives or friends when the domestic violence between his parents escalated. Carl felt safer when he “was removed from the situation.” In order to feel safe, the co-researchers were called upon physically to escape situations they felt were dangerous or abusive.

It was not always possible for the co-researchers physically to escape dangerous and uncomfortable situations. In these instances the co-researchers would resort to fantasy in order to cope. For instance, Carl remembers that “a big part of [his] childhood was spent reading comics. It became [his] little sanctuary, [his] own little world where [he] could escape to and it was a break from whatever [he] was experiencing at home.” In addition, Carl reports that he relied heavily on television as a means of escape. Brent also relied heavily on television in order to escape, to the extent that he experienced difficulty when he was younger distinguishing cartoons from reality. Fantasy did not resolve issues for Brent and Carl, but it did offer them a reprieve from untenable circumstances.

Escape was not always an option for the co-researchers. Carl was consistently “jarred” and fearful whenever his father arrived home. Brent recalls “many times sitting in [his] room crying, and it was no reason, [he] hadn’t hurt [himself], [he] hadn’t fallen down, nobody had beat [him] up or teased [him]. [He] just couldn’t take it anymore.” According to Allan, the perpetrator of his abuse “kept [him] under his control. Um, to
where [he] was afraid of him. But at the same time [he] wanted [his] companionship…”

Allan’s abuser terrorized him repeatedly and “fed off his fear.” Allan feared that this man “could kill [him], just go too far and that would be it.” The co-researchers lived in a veritably constant state of intense emotional arousal and fear.

The emotional intensity experienced by the co-researchers was very taxing both physically and psychologically; however, the co-researchers eventually developed a need for this level of intensity in their relationships with others. This is captured in the following account provided by Allan:

And it was always kinda like an adrenaline rush you know like he would always you know, like he’d get an adrenaline rush out of scaring me and you know he’d always keep me at this height of like, you know, I was always in a state of arousal and you know adrenaline. You know, just pumping through me. Um, and uh, I guess I kinda liked the adrenaline of him scaring me. I got used to it. You know, to where it just became addictive.

Brent also recalls being “really excited” by the “danger part of [his] abuse, doing something bad.” As a result, “for the last ten years [sex] had to be something destructive, something degrading or abusive” for Brent. Carl also finds the level of risk associated with sex to be enticing. He believes that this has caused him to be “a lot more reckless in areas of sex.” He recalls being “really peaked” and “thrilled” by the prospect of engaging in “unsafe” sexual behavior. The “unsafe” sexual behavior Carl is referring to includes casual and anonymous sex in public parks and washrooms. These experiences are “heightened” for Carl by “it being dark, not being able to see what was happening, who
was there and the threat of violence.” The co-researchers have managed to reinterpret their experiences of abuse by focusing on what they consider to be a redeeming quality of those experiences—namely a heightened state of physiological and emotional arousal.

Through reinterpretation of their abuse, the co-researchers are allowing themselves to revisit those early and damaging experiences. This provides them with a sense of mastery and control that was decidedly absent from their lives as children. For instance, Brent recently met a man who in his view was “really twisted and bent” and invited him to “see what [he] [could] do.” Brent has gained a sense of control and mastery in this situation by inviting the other man to engage in dangerous sexual practices with him and assuming that the man would be unable to harm him. These feelings are unfortunately short-lived, and the co-researchers re-enact these scenarios repeatedly.

Due to the intensity of these encounters, the co-researchers find it difficult to remain fulfilled in what could be considered a more conservative relationship. They often find themselves feeling bored and detached in those relationships. This brings about an uncomfortable level of anxiety that the co-researchers then attempt to alleviate by engaging in more intense and threatening relationships. In order to feel safe and fully engaged in human contact, the co-researchers engage in risky sexual behavior.

**Regard for Personal Health**

The brevity of the co-researchers narratives regarding their health is somewhat surprising given that all three men are HIV-positive. In fact, Carl only considers his
Allan and Brent give very little consideration to their physical health but instead focus on their mental health. For Allan and Brent, the overriding concern is not that they have a terminal illness, but who they should be with when they get ill. Once again, it is the meaningful connections that they have established with others that takes precedence in their lives.

Allan believes that he was infected with HIV when he was seventeen, and he tested positive for the virus when he was nineteen. Allan has “managed to stay healthy until this day” and he attributes this to the fear he has “that if [he] ever got sick with HIV, [he’d] have to go live with [his father and stepmother].” Brent tested positive for HIV twelve years ago, and he supposes that he “picked up the HIV disease...having the gamut of unprotected sex, and uh, when [he] got the news, the results, he was happy.” Brent’s doctor cried when Brent informed him of the news he had received from the public health nurse, but he “just took it all in stride.” Brent believed he was going to die and he “just didn’t want to die alone.” As a result, Brent offered another man “unconditional love” if he would take care of him, “and hold [his] hand when he died.” For Allan and Brent, the people they live with are of greater concern than whether or not they live.

Mental health is an issue that has caused a considerable amount of concern for Allan and Brent. Allan reports that as a child he developed “real bad nervous habits.” Both men have battled depression for most of their lives. Allan began attempting suicide when he was thirteen, and this continued until the age of nineteen; he has not attempted suicide since learning his HIV status. Brent was diagnosed with clinical depression prior to learning his HIV status, but he became “overwhelmed” with depression when “[he]
didn’t die [and] [he] didn’t get sick.” The HIV therapies Brent was receiving at the time were also causing him “nervous problems.” According to Brent, one of his body’s greatest defences is that when he is sufficiently compromised physically his “mind starts to go” and “the stresses in his life started to go with it.” Emotional trauma exceeds even the formidable physical trauma these men have experienced in their lives.

Allan describes the emotional trauma he experienced during a flashback as “very intense and scary.” He was unaware of what was happening to him and thought “maybe I’m losing my mind.” He has spent years in therapy working through “a lot of the emotional stuff that was behind it.” According to Allan, “it’s kind of like shedding a light on a dark corner.” By considering “how really ill mentally” his father and the perpetrator of his sexual abuse are, Allan is now beginning to put his experience into perspective.

The distinction between physical and mental health is perhaps too strongly stressed by Allan and Brent. Their depressed and anxious emotional states predisposed them to HIV infection. HIV infection has also impacted their emotional states. The dichotomy the co-researchers believe exists between physical and mental health reflects the separation the co-researchers have experienced within themselves as well as with others.
CHAPTER SEVEN

Discussion

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to gain an appreciation of the lived experience of HIV-seropositive gay men who were physically and sexually abused as children in order to understand the factors that may have predisposed them to HIV infection. As indicated in the previous literature review (e.g., Strathdee et al., 1996; Lodico & Diclemente, 1994), survivors of childhood physical and sexual abuse are overrepresented in the HIV-seropositive population, and gay males are far more likely to report a history of physical and sexual abuse. Evidently, the observation made by Zeirler et al. (1991, p. 575) regarding safer sex messages “missing the point for people whose lives have been complicated by sexual victimization” is an accurate one. If safer sex messages “miss the point” with these men, it calls into question the definition of safety employed by males who were victimized. In order to address this discrepancy, the research question employed in this investigation asks “How do gay men living with HIV/AIDS define and experience safety in their lives after being abused as children?”

In order to ascertain the manner in which HIV-seropositive gay men who were abused as children define and experience safety in their lives, an existential phenomenological approach was employed in this investigation. To date, self-completed questionnaire surveys have been utilized to obtain data in this area; however, this data
does not necessarily reflect the lived experience of respondents. Respondents may interpret questions differently, and their responses may be misunderstood during interpretation. The existential phenomenological approach allowed the co-researchers to reflect on the meaning of their responses with the researcher. Reflections were exchanged between the researcher and co-researchers until an understanding of the phenomenon in question was realized and validated by both parties. This produced a biographical text that is rich in meaning. The descriptions of lived experience contained in these texts were then utilized to gain insight of the research question.

A number of themes emerged as the research question was explored by the researcher and co-researchers. Thematic analysis revealed the following seven themes that comprise the structure of the co-researchers’ lived experience: **Alienation Endured, The Deprecation of Self, Yearning for Intimacy, The Experience of Repetitive Betrayal, The Resignation to Abuse, The Experience of Sexual Obsession and Safety Defined as Connection to Others.** An eighth theme, **Regard for Personal Health,** is also considered, primarily due to its absence or low priority in the co-researchers’ narratives.

The first theme to emerge consistently in the co-researchers’ narratives is the enduring sense of alienation that pervades their experience. Each of the co-researchers reports feeling abandoned by his mother at an early age. This was particularly traumatic as these men relied exclusively on their mothers as a source of physical and emotional security when they were children. The co-researchers’ fathers were very distant emotionally, and this would often escalate to a degree that the co-researchers experienced as outright rejection. The co-researchers physical and emotional needs were often
neglected by their parents, culminating in the co-researchers' feelings of extreme isolation and loneliness.

Ironically, the co-researchers' feelings of isolation and loneliness were exacerbated by the manner in which their siblings related to them. Each of the co-researchers has at least one older sibling. Due to the scarce and limited expression of nurturance within their families, the children became rivals for their parents' attention and affection. The co-researchers' siblings treated them as adversaries, and this was experienced by them as abandonment and rejection.

The co-researchers' endurance of alienation was not limited to their families; they also experienced this state with their peers. Each of the co-researchers reports "feeling different" and outside of the realm of their peers. Their inability to relate to their peers is in part generated by the extraordinary differences in the family dynamics experienced by the co-researchers. Although they were unable to identify specifically the manner in which their families differed from those of their peers, the co-researchers sensed that their experiences were unusual, and this estranged them from their contemporaries. In Allan's case, the experience of alienation was compounded by the fact that he had immigrated from another country. Carl's experience of alienation was intensified by his obesity. All three men felt further alienated when they became aware of their sexual identities.

The alienation endured by the co-researchers contributed to their deprecation of self, which is the second theme that emerged consistently in their narratives. Although the co-researchers are all striving to overcome adversity in their lives, they are left with a sense that they are in some manner inferior. The alienation that these men have endured has severely compromised their self-esteem. The inability of the co-researchers' families
to provide them with a loving and nurturing home has been interpreted by them as their unworthiness to receive such care. This can be viewed as a coping strategy whereby the co-researchers attempt to gain some control of their chaotic environment by believing that they are responsible for the treatment they received. The co-researchers then expend every effort to assess and fulfill the needs of others. In this manner, they attempt to appease those individuals that they are dependent on for physical and emotional support.

When their efforts to appease others fail to achieve the desired results, the co-researchers' self-esteem is further compromised. In response to this, the co-researchers further intensify their efforts to satisfy the needs and demands of others. In this process, the co-researchers lose sight of and minimize their own needs. They endure humiliation and regret as the needs and demands of others take precedence over their own. This serves to deprecate their already damaged and fragile self-image.

Lacking self-esteem, the co-researchers find it very difficult to assert themselves. This is exacerbated by the fact that the needs of others preclude their own. Confrontation is avoided at all costs, in part due to the volatile nature of the co-researchers' early exposure to confrontation within their families. In the past, the co-researchers' experience of anger suggested that it was a destructive rather than constructive and affirming emotion. The co-researchers were physically and sexually abused during expressions of anger—both theirs and their abusers'—predisposing them to suppress and avoid this seemingly dangerous emotion.

In order to avoid confrontation, the co-researchers often believe and adopt the distorted opinions others have of them. This is perhaps best—and most alarmingly—illustrated in the attempts Allan's step-mother made to have him officially declared a
"suppressive" or evil person in the Church of Scientology. This understandably and severely undermined Allan's experience and view of himself. It became unconscionable for Allan to legitimately express his needs in such a hostile environment. Allan was eventually absolved of his stepmother's accusations. Unfortunately, Allan's sense of integrity and self-worth were denigrated in the process.

Allan's experience is admittedly exceptional, but the experiences of Brent and Carl closely approximate that of Allan's. The co-researchers feel undeserving of experiences that may be interpreted as favorable, and suspect that such experiences will eventually lead to their demise. If the co-researchers accept these experiences and feel that they are deserved, they must also admit that they have suffered terrible injustices, and their worlds once again become chaotic. The co-researchers' rejection of said experiences reestablishes their sense of control, and calls into question their ability to trust others or themselves.

The co-researchers are unable to trust their own judgements and perceptions and continue to distrust others. This encompasses the third thematic variable that has been consistently present in the co-researchers narratives: The Repetitive Experience of Betrayal. The co-researchers continue to be deceived by others. They have received little if any confirmation of their own perceptions and intuitions. This has left them vulnerable to the exploitation and manipulation of others.

Secrecy and denial were relied upon in the co-researchers' families. In these environments it became difficult for the co-researchers to distinguish the true and often harsh reality of their experiences. Abuse was portrayed to them in favorable terms suggesting to the co-researchers that they should welcome the experience. After repeated
betrayals the co-researchers became uncertain of their own judgement, and had ample evidence that others were untrustworthy. Even if they were to disclose their abuse, the co-researchers were convinced that they would not be believed.

The co-researchers were coerced by their abusers to engage in questionable behaviors that were out of character for them. After engaging in these behaviors, the co-researchers began to doubt their own integrity. This instilled in them a sense that they were then deserving of abuse. It has only been recently that the co-researchers have come to understand that they did not deserve and were not responsible for the abuse they experienced. For most of their lives, the co-researchers not only experienced but were resigned to the fact that they would be abused.

Resignation to Abuse is the next theme that consistently arises in the co-researchers narratives. The sexual abuse of the co-researchers did not occur in isolation. They also witnessed and were recipients of physical and emotional abuse. The co-researchers rarely had the opportunity to feel at ease, as they were constantly attempting to anticipate and avoid their next abusive encounter. This was not always possible, as the co-researchers were frequently abused without warning or reason.

Unable to anticipate or avoid their abuse, the co-researchers eventually resigned themselves to the occurrence of abusive experiences. The co-researchers witnessed and experienced so much abuse within their families, it became extremely difficult for them to envision a life without abuse. Abuse occurred so frequently in the co-researchers families, it allowed them to minimize the impact of particular episodes. They have only recently begun to appreciate the extent of their abusive experiences. These abusive environments afforded little if any opportunity for the co-researchers to engage in healthy
affectionate relationships with others. Many of the emotional needs denied the co-researchers as children continue to haunt them in their adult lives.

*Yearning for Intimacy* is also a theme that the co-researchers express in their narratives. These men have expended a great deal of effort in their attempts to establish loving and trusting relationships with others, but have met with limited success. The co-researchers are often confused by their interpersonal relationships. This is not surprising given the tumultuous interpersonal relationships the co-researchers were witness to within their families. Without adequate role models the co-researchers lacked the skills necessary to establish healthy and meaningful relationships with others.

Lacking self-esteem, the co-researchers attempt to win the affection of others by anticipating and meeting their needs, often to their own detriment. The co-researchers expend every effort to ensure that their partners are satisfied in return for their companionship; however, the co-researchers are unable to set appropriate limits with others and are often exploited. In the past, the co-researchers have been abandoned once their resources are depleted.

The co-researchers have experienced difficulty defining intimacy within their relationships. Their experience of intimacy has been distorted and sexualized by sexual abuse. As a result, sex and intimacy have become confused for the co-researchers. The limited attention received by the co-researchers in childhood was often sexual in nature. In their attempts to receive affection as adults, the co-researchers often rely on sex. This proves to be unrewarding as the co-researchers’ valid emotional needs remain unfulfilled. In response to this, the co-researchers escalate their sexual behavior in an attempt to have their needs met.
The co-researchers' reliance on sex to establish intimacy has given rise to their *Experience of Sexual Obsession*, which is a common theme in their narratives. Their obsession with sex is in part due to the co-researchers' feelings of unworthiness. As children, the co-researchers were informed by their experiences of sexual abuse that they were valued as sexual objects. In order to alleviate their diminished sense of self-worth, the co-researchers frequently engage in sexual activity. These activities often leave the co-researchers unfulfilled and ashamed. This further diminishes their sense of self-worth, thereby escalating their sexual activity.

The co-researchers were forced prematurely to confront physically and psychologically their sexuality, and they were overwhelmed by the experience. The intensity of these episodes also brought with it a level of arousal the co-researchers eventually began to enjoy. The co-researchers now require this level of intensity within their relationships. It is unreasonable to assume that any relationship would be able to sustain this level of intensity in the long-term. In order to recapture the intensity of the abusive experiences, the co-researchers obsessively engage in threatening and potentially dangerous sexual activities.

In order to feel safe in their worlds, the co-researchers need to experience meaningful human connections. *The Experience of Safety Through Human Connection* is the final theme that consistently appears in the co-researchers narratives. The co-researchers dread the prospect of living and dying alone, and will give of themselves unconditionally to ensure that this does not occur. To be alone confirms the co-researchers' sense that they are defective and undeserving of affection. Establishing
meaningful connections with others disputes the notion that the co-researchers are somehow different and incapable of being understood.

Due to the abusive and damaging nature of their past relationships, the co-researchers are hesitant participants in any new relationship. Expecting to be harmed, the co-researchers may appear aloof and be rebuffed by potential friends. The co-researchers have all indicated that they have a great deal of difficulty determining or believing that another person would be interested in them. As a result, opportunities to establish meaningful connections with others are not acted upon by the co-researchers, and this reinforces their sense of alienation. Much of the co-researchers' vulnerability is derived from their sense of alienation. Establishing meaningful connections and building a system of social support and interaction diminishes the co-researchers' sense of alienation, and by doing so mitigates their experiences of vulnerability. As their experiences of vulnerability are lessened, the co-researchers can begin to experience an enhanced sense of safety in their lives.

In the past, the co-researchers would attempt to establish meaningful relationships without any regard for their personal health. Surprisingly, Regard for Personal Health is not a theme that appeared consistently for the co-researchers. Allan and Brent do make reference to their physical health, but only briefly. Carl only makes reference to his physical health in consideration of the manner in which it affects others. It is their connection to others that is of primary importance to the co-researchers.

The co-researchers have suffered a great deal of emotional trauma. The intensity of the emotive discomfort generated by this trauma exceeds the considerable physical pain these men endured. As a result, the co-researchers are primarily concerned with their
emotional wellbeing. Their emotional wellbeing is best served by establishing meaningful connections with others. This concern takes precedence over any physical concerns the co-researchers may have.

**Limitations of the Study**

While the results of this investigation are compelling, there are certain limitations that restrict its utility. Due to the descriptive nature of existential phenomenological inquiry, and the volume of data produced in such an endeavor, participation was limited to three co-researchers. The inclusion of three co-researchers in this study generated rich and varied texts for thematic analysis; however, the number of research participants precludes generalization to a larger population.

The data comprising this study have been generated in retrospect, and the limitations of memory may have compromised the integrity of the data provided by the co-researchers. Significant events may have escaped the ability of co-researchers to recall, and data that is recalled may be contaminated with the passage of time. At times, the co-researchers were unable to discriminate events that they felt were significant, and this may have contributed to inaccurate interpretation.

The co-researchers were self-selected and this may have contributed to bias in the results. Individuals less inclined to participate in this study may have disclosed life experiences that are significantly different from those provided by the co-researchers. The life experiences disclosed by the co-researchers in this study might have differed considerably if delivered to someone other than the author.
The co-researchers have all been engaged in long-term therapeutic relationships with the researcher. On occasion, they have engaged in a therapeutic relationship with the researcher simultaneously in a group setting. While all parties are of the opinion that collusive relationships did not transpire, there exists a possibility that each influenced the other to a degree that all remained unaware. Every effort was expended to ensure that this did not occur.

The participants in this study are Caucasian men in their thirties. They are from middle-class backgrounds and possess a high degree of educational and employment experience. This was not a selection criterion for participation in this study, but these are the characteristics of the men who were willing to share their life experience with the author within the context of this project. It is not inconceivable that individuals identifying themselves as members of other communities would produce narratives far removed from those considered in the current investigation.

There may have been some hesitation on the part of the co-researchers to disclose the full extent of their experiences. Differences in the sexual orientation of the researcher and co-researchers may have interfered in the exchange of information. The co-researchers have endured a great deal of shame and humiliation in their experiences, and this may have prevented them from recalling in full all that has transpired. Many of these concerns are alleviated somewhat by the extensive therapeutic relationships the researcher has established with the co-researchers over a substantial period of time.
Implications for Theory

The results of this investigation corroborate much of the existing literature on this subject. The experiences reported by the co-researchers fall within the parameters of previous studies, but are captured in a more comprehensive manner in this investigation. A review of the literature demonstrates that many parallels exist in the experiences of participants in those studies and the experiences of the co-researchers in this investigation. There are exceptions however, and these are in part due to the manner in which data was interpreted in those studies in comparison to this research.

In their investigation, Carmen & Reiker (1989, p.437) observed that participants demonstrated “low self-esteem, self-hatred, affective instability, poor control of aggressive impulses and disturbed relationships with inability to trust and behave in self-protective ways.” With the exception of “poor control of aggressive impulses” this description seemingly captures the experiences of the co-researchers. It is contentious however to claim that the co-researchers are “unable to act in self-protective ways.” The co-researchers strive to achieve safety in their lives, and behavior that is erroneously viewed as self-destructive is actually a means for them to cope under chaotic circumstances.

As McBride & Markos (1994) point out, sexual abuse survivors often believe they have no rights at all. This is certainly the case with the co-researchers in this investigation, although they have since made significant advances in their attempts to secure their rights. The co-researchers’ belief in the fact that they have no rights extends
from the alienation they have endured, and can also be appreciated as a coping strategy. The co-researchers' experiences of abandonment, neglect and rejection culminated in a profound sense of alienation. If the co-researchers were to attempt to secure their rights in such a hostile environment, they would likely suffer further abuse. In ascribing to the belief that they have no rights, the co-researchers are in fact behaving in a self-protective manner.

The belief that they have no rights has made it very difficult for the co-researchers to assert themselves, and this is reflected in the literature (e.g., Allers & Benjack, 1991; Carmen & Reiker, 1989). The co-researchers have found themselves in revictimizing relationships where they are unable to set their own limits. The priority the co-researchers place on establishing meaningful connections with others takes precedence over the negotiation of safer sex. In an attempt to establish a sense of safety in their lives, the co-researchers are willing to engage in risky behaviour.

The willingness of co-researchers to engage in risky behavior is also brought about by the level of arousal such intense experiences produce. The co-researchers all report an affinity for these heightened states or arousal. Van der Kolk, Perry & Herman (1991) postulate that the opioids released during traumatic events may become addictive, and this is confirmed when Allan states “I guess I kinda liked the adrenaline of him scaring me. I got used to it. You know, to where it just became addictive.” James (1989) suggests that survivors of abuse may place themselves in high-risk sexual situations in order to reenact the intensity of childhood abuse. This is also confirmed by the co-researchers. According to Putnam (1990) this type of behavior may be an attempt to retrieve traumatic memories that are stored in a state specific form. If this is the case, the
high-risk sexual behaviors the co-researchers engage in may be attempts to resolve their experiences of childhood abuse. Brent’s attempts to gain mastery over abusive experiences lend credence to the theories of James (1990) and Putnam (1990). Behaviors that appear to be self-destructive on the surface, are in fact attempts to resolve early trauma.

The existing literature tends to view survivors of childhood physical and sexual abuse in negative terms. A great deal is written about their inabilities, with little said regarding the remarkable and often ingenious strategies employed by these individuals in order to survive horrific circumstances and overcome extreme adversity. This serves to disempower individuals who have already endured extreme oppression in their lives. The results of this investigation suggest that the co-researchers are unique individuals who demonstrate a monumental resilience in their lives.

**Implications for Practice**

As previously indicated, the co-researchers have engaged in long-term individual and group counselling with the researcher. The issues faced by the co-researchers are very challenging and complex. A single theory or approach cannot possibly address the multitude of concerns these men are facing. Working with clientele from this population is demanding and at times daunting, but ultimately the experience can be very rewarding.

It is imperative that trust be established in the therapeutic relationship, but the task can be difficult to achieve with individuals who have been abused. Due to the abusive nature of their past relationships survivors have difficulty establishing trust and can be hesitant participants in any treatment process (Allers & Benjack (1992; Carmen &
Reiker, 1989; Mcbride & Markos, 1994). It is not uncommon for these clients to miss or arrive late for appointments. It is important for counsellors to remain patient and not get frustrated with these clients, as this may be a strategy to test the trustworthiness and commitment of the counsellor. Abandonment is an issue these clients struggle with, and it is important for them to know that their counsellor will reliably be there for them.

Clients who have been sexually abused have a tendency to sexualize their interpersonal relationships. It is important that clear boundaries are acknowledged and understood by the client and counsellor. In their past relationships, abused clients have had their boundaries violated and distorted. Utilizing clear boundary definitions in the therapeutic process allows clients to begin negotiating their own needs and setting appropriate limits for themselves and others.

The needs of clients in this population are understandably great, and the demands they make on their counsellors can be excessive at times. For some of these individuals, the therapeutic relationship is often the first interpersonal relationship where they can safely express their needs. It is important that counsellors make clear the reasonable expectations clients may have of them. This ensures that clients will not become over-reliant on the therapeutic relationship, and invites clients to establish new connections with others so that they have a system of social support.

As Evans & Sullivan (1995) point out, it is essential for counsellors to develop their own plan for self care when working with this population. In their experience, they have found that working with survivors of abuse can invoke secondary Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. They suggest developing interests outside of the area of counselling, taking adequate time off, maintaining a regular exercise plan and nutritious diet. It is
extremely important that counsellors maintain a balance between their professional and personal lives if they are interested in doing work in this area for an extended period of time.

The work that the researcher has done with the co-researchers in this investigation has provided us with an important therapeutic tool. The biographical texts produced in this research were later used as a reference in therapy sessions. The co-researchers found that their narratives assisted them to focus on issues they were addressing in therapy. In the past, when the co-researchers attempted to tell their stories, they met with denial and hostility. Their participation in this investigation gave the co-researchers an opportunity to have their stories heard, and provided them with tangible evidence that they were understood. In order to facilitate the therapeutic process, it may be useful for counsellors to collaborate with clients on the construction of their life stories.

**Implications for Future Research**

This study relied on the narratives supplied by three HIV-seropositive gay males with a history of childhood physical and sexual abuse. In order to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the experience of safety and vulnerability to HIV infection, these variables can be considered within different contexts. For instance, experiences of HIV-seropositive gay males who were not abused would enhance the understanding of safety derived in this investigation. The inclusion of abuse survivors who are not HIV positive can also be incorporated into the research. Consideration of the experiences of males identifying as heterosexual or bisexual can also broaden the
The applicability of the findings in this research project, as would the inclusion of females with varied sexual orientations.

The revision of educational materials that aim to prevent the transmission of HIV is also worthy of consideration. Educational materials that incorporate the experience of abuse within the parameters of HIV prevention may prove to be an effective addition to existing prevention campaigns. For example, at one point during the execution of this research project, Brent was asked to respond to the statement “If you’re not using a condom, you’re still being abused.” He indicated that this would have given him cause to reconsider his behavior in light of this connection.

Future research may also assess the utility of providing sensitivity training to educators and service providers so that they are aware of the obstacles being faced by youth whose sexual orientation places them in a minority. The results of this investigation suggest that the alienation experienced by co-researchers prevented them from sharing their experiences of abuse with others. If these individuals can be provided with the same level of acceptance and understanding heterosexual youth are afforded, they are unlikely to experience the same degree of alienation and their vulnerability to abuse may be decreased.

It may also be prudent to consider the efficacy of existential phenomenology as an approach to treatment as well as research. The co-researchers found their participation in this project to be very rewarding, and they continue to use the texts produced by this research as a reflective tool in therapy. It takes a considerable amount of effort on the part of the client and the counsellor to collaborate in such an effort, but the resulting product may provide effective therapeutic benefits.
Personal Reflections

While I admire the resiliency of the co-researchers, I was surprised by my own fragility as I worked to complete this project. Many of the stories conveyed by the co-researchers are tragic in both their content and their legacy. After undertaking this project I began working as a counsellor in a clinic located in Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside. This area has recently gained media notoriety, and boasts the distinction of being the most impoverished postal code in all of Canada. The majority of the clients utilizing this clinic have stories to tell that are very similar to those of the co-researchers. At times I felt as if I had been immersed in human misery.

This experience was useful in that I became aware of my limitations as a counsellor. It also increased my admiration for the co-researchers and others who find themselves in similar circumstances. Many of my assumptions were challenged and my respect for these individuals was enhanced. I am inspired by their continued efforts to triumph over seemingly insurmountable adversity. I have also gained an appreciation of my own good fortune.

During the execution of this project I also became a father, and I believe this heightened my sensitivity to the research material. Reflecting on the meaning of childhood trauma became at times a disconcerting and arduous task as I attempted to settle into my role as father. I did not want to consider the possibility of this happening to anyone. I am thankful to the co-researchers for sharing their stories. The experience has instilled in me a far greater appreciation of the importance of early childhood experiences.
At times it was difficult for me to differentiate my role as researcher from that of counsellor. The co-researchers were also clients, and I was required to exercise considerable caution to ensure that the data being collected was an accurate reflection of their experience and not an outcome of the therapeutic process. This enabled me to clarify my role as a counsellor as well as researcher.

The co-researchers chose to participate in this project with the hope that their experiences would be of benefit to others. Their participation in this endeavor was an opportunity for them to reframe their experiences, and is a testament to their courage. It is my hope that the effort expended on this project adequately captures their experiences so that others may benefit from them.

It should be noted that others are also represented in the co-researchers' stories. While this investigation focused on the co-researchers, the stories of the other individuals in the co-researchers' narratives are also worthy of consideration. The co-researchers and I did not intend to demonize other individuals represented in their stories. Perhaps they too have experienced events that in retrospect would allow a greater understanding of their behavior. They also deserve the opportunity to tell their stories from their own perspective.
References


Strathdee, S., Patrick, D., Archibald, C., Ofner, M., Cornelisse, P., Rekart, M., Schecter,


Appendix A: Interview Schedule

Due to the sensitive and intimate nature of the information to be discussed in this interview, it is important that the informant feel safe and comfortable. In order to accomplish this, a relatively unproblematic area of inquiry will initiate the interview. More sensitive areas of discussion will be introduced later in the interview, unless the topic is broached by the informant first. The informant will control the direction and flow of the interview as much as possible. Occasionally the researcher will find it necessary to focus the topic when the informant has exhausted the matter or asks for direction. It is appropriate at these times for the researcher to direct the focus with statements such as: “Could you tell me about the time when...?” or “I’d like to know (more) about...” At times the informant will feel embarrassed or uncomfortable with the topic of discussion. On these occasions it is appropriate for the researcher to intervene with comments such as: “I know this is difficult for you, but if you can I would like you to tell me more about...” or “People often feel uncomfortable when they talk about these things, but I was wondering if you could tell me...” Should the respondent wish to terminate the interview at any time, that wish will be respected with thanks. The interview guidelines that follow are to be used as guidelines only.

- **Family/Social History:** As you know, I am interested in the experiences of HIV-positive gay men in order to understand what their experience of safety was like. I was wondering if you could tell me about your family. What was it like growing up?

- **Behavioral History:** Have you ever done anything that you later worried about or got you into trouble? What was your experience of school/work? What sorts of things do you do now that you enjoy/dislike?
• **Health History:** Do you remember times when you felt particularly good/bad physically/emotionally? How long did those times last? Did you ever require treatment in those times? Do (does) these (this) thing(s) (what) trouble(s) you now? Are you seeking (receiving) treatment for that?

• **Sexual History:** I realize that this is a very private topic, but it would help me to understand you if you could tell me a bit about your sexual experiences. How old were you when you first saw or experienced something that might have been sexual? Could you tell me about those experiences. Have those experiences changed as you grew up?

• **Abuse History:** You’ve mentioned some times when things were pretty rough and you got hurt. Could you tell me more about those times? Who was (were) the person (people) who hurt you? Were you able to (have you) told anyone about this? What was their reaction to you? Can you describe how you felt about it (then, after, now)?

• **Safety/Danger Experiences:** Have you ever experienced a powerful sense of safety/danger in your life? Who are the people and what are the events connected with this experience that stand out for you? How has this experience affected you? What changes in your life do you believe are most strongly associated with this experience? Did this experience affect significant others in your life. What were/are the feelings that this experience has generated for you? Are there any thoughts that you’ve had regarding this experience that stand out for you? Did you experience any physiological changes while this experience was happening/as a result of this experience? Is there anything else you would like to share with me regarding this experience?