



of the Clinic for HIV-Related Concerns at Toronto's Mount Sinai Hospital says the successes and failures surrounding the use of protease inhibitors have introduced the community to new grief dynamics. On one hand, "some men who were preparing to die now find their health at least temporarily restored. When their own life was jeopardized, they put their own grief on hold. Now that they are feeling better, a well of grief that had been suppressed often starts bubbling up." On the other hand, HIV-positive men who start taking the combination drugs but derive no benefit face yet another defeat in their lives, Peterkin observed.

Of course, gay men aren't the only people to suffer multiple loss. Almost 2 million Canadians served during the 2 world wars and many people have survived mass disasters, and there are some similarities in reactions to multiple loss among all these groups. "Anybody who experiences multiple loss can suffer from survival guilt and melancholy or numbness," said Peterkin. "They may indulge in substance abuse or risky behaviour. There can be an increased sense of fatalism."

## A war without heroes

But AIDS-related multiple loss has some distinguishing characteristics, many of which stem from societal prejudice. "War vets also suffer multiple loss, but often they come home as heroes," said Peterkin. "Gay men still face societal hostility and the situation is ripe for their losses not to be understood."

Because their relationships often go unacknowledged by society or unsupported by families, gay men frequently experience "disfranchised grief" that is not publicly acknowledged or endorsed — similar grief may be shared, for example, by a mistress or an ex-spouse.

At the same time, when their friends die, gay men suffer a "de facto loss of social support, which we know leads to distress," said Hallman. "Having poor social supports is a high predictor of psychological distress."

As well, the loss of friends is especially powerful for gay men, because very often friends *are* their family. "For them it is like losing family members," said Peterkin. "Many of these men are distanced from their biological family and their friends are their family of choice."

Rapsey said his dead friends "are so much a part of my youth that I can't remember my youth without them. We were gay and not part of mainstream society, and in the '70s and '80s we weren't accepted to the same degree as now. So our family was our social group of friends. These were the people we came out with, and went through crises of broken hearts. . . . These were the people whom I really thought and hoped would be aging with me now,

and seeing my temples go grey and watching my hair fall out and my waist expand."

Gay men are often alienated from traditional religions, many of which preach that homosexuality is unnatural and wrong, yet intimate encounters with death naturally raise spiritual issues. That is why membership has increased dramatically at the Metropolitan Community Church, which ministers particularly to the gay and lesbian community and is located in Canada's larger cities.

## Surviving survival

Survival guilt among gay men can cause special problems. "What did I do that was different [from those who got AIDS]?" said Rapsey. "Probably nothing, to tell you the truth. What is it about me that has allowed me to continue to be healthy and active and productive in life? One thing my survival has done is put responsibility on me. OK, you have what these people weren't able to have and so you have to make good. So there is that burden."

Dr. Philip Berger, a Toronto family physician who has treated AIDS patients since the epidemic began, said he treated one closely knit group of friends and now all of them are dead save for a single HIV-negative man. Just before he died, one member of this group told Berger that within several decades there would be no one to remember him and his friends, no living person to tell the stories. "You sort of get a sense of almost nonexistence," Berger observed.

## Education resources available for MDs

Four different items dealing with multiple-loss and other issues related to HIV disease are available to physicians through the Canadian Psychiatric Association. Order forms are available from Francine Knoops, 613 234-2815 x38; [cpa@medical.org](mailto:cpa@medical.org) (use *HIV materials* as the subject line).

- *HIV & psychiatry: a training and resource manual* (160-page reference manual)
- *The consultant mentor directory for HIV disease and psychiatry* (pocket guide listing Canadian psychiatrists who are experts in HIV-related issues)
- *Living with HIV and dementia: a guide for the extended family* (18-page brochure)
- *Learning to care: an introduction to HIV psychiatry* (57-minute video)