What If?

In an opinion piece titled "What If We Treated COVID-19 the Way We Treat HIV?" Jeremiah Johnson, an activist living with HIV and the HIV project director for the Treatment Action Group, urges for a renewal. Below is an excerpt.

May 17, 2021 By Jeremiah Johnson

The COVID-19 pandemic has revealed that as a nation we are OK with mandating behavior change for the sake of public health in marginalized populations but not for society as a whole—and certainly not for privileged classes.

If we treated the new coronavirus in the same way we have treated HIV—and if we stigmatized straight white men the way we stigmatize literally every other population when they struggle disproportionately with health conditions—the narrative around masks and other preventive measures would be quite different in America right now.

As a gay man, when I struggled with preventing HIV infection, I solely was held responsible. I was given no credit for any of the preventive measures I had taken to avoid the retrovirus, and my challenges with accessing and successfully utilizing prevention options were continually dismissed.

I compare that to a recent New England Journal of Medicine podcast where I heard a doctor say that they didn't think the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention should promote N95 masks or double masking because people might struggle with the discomfort. Hearing him say that, I couldn't help but laugh. Not because I think that individual comfort should not be a factor in scaling up preventive measures for infectious diseases—it absolutely should.

I laughed because of how different the conversation around masks has been compared to barrier methods for HIV prevention and how unsurprising it is that, once again, the public narrative prioritizes the comfort of privileged groups while readily mandating behavior change for others.

Those of us fighting to avoid HIV didn't have doctors and public health officials acknowledging that our barrier methods—primarily condoms—were uncomfortable and difficult to adhere to 100% of the time. In fact, there was a mass effort to gaslight almost anyone who dared to say that barrier methods were difficult to use.

Powerful individuals were not sympathetic to our challenges with condoms in the way that so many are sympathetic to challenges with masks. And I'm sorry, but for many of us, condoms are a hell of a lot harder to use all the time compared to masks.

Can you imagine if gay men had shown up with guns to a state capital building and threatened to kidnap a governor because we were being told to use barrier methods for sex and reduce our number of sexual partners, our equivalent of social distancing?

To be clear, I do not advocate for stigmatizing conservatives and straight white men around their behaviors with COVID-19. And I do not advocate for overly authoritarian responses to epidemics and pandemics. I believe that any time we can reduce the level of stigma in relation to health conditions, it is better for society as a whole.

But for a year, as I've seen conservatives and straight white men whine and complain about even the smallest attempts to alter their behaviors (and, yes, I know #NotAllStraightWhiteMen), I just want to shake them.

I will not do that, but I do feel once again convinced after the past year (really the past five years) that the behavior of conservative white leadership has definitively shown just how little perspective they have.

More than ever, I feel we must fight for a renewal in this country—particularly through a revolution of Black, brown, female and queer leadership—lest we continue to follow behind a demographic that is decidedly less prepared for survival compared to those who have had to fight for their safety and protection.

We must follow those who, because of lived pain and suffering, understand the difference between real and imaginary threats, those who have walked through the fire and emerged more resilient and powerful than ever.

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