Love in the Time of COVID-19

For many people living with HIV, the coronavirus pandemic has added to the challenge of finding intimacy.

January 4, 2021 By Tim Murphy

The last time Xio Mora-Lopez and Ray Welsh saw each other in person before the COVID-19 crisis was Valentine's Day. They ate at an Italian restaurant near a house for people living with HIV operated by Buddies of NJ that Welsh manages.

She and Welsh met a few years ago at an HIV-related event. They bonded over their shared HIV-positive status, and Mora-Lopez wound up volunteering at Buddies of NJ. Shortly after that, they had their first meal together. They've been sharing meals ever since.

They started speaking with each other by phone nearly every day during last spring's COVID-19 stay-at-home orders. When summer arrived, they decided to see each other in person again, venturing to Asbury Park, New Jersey, Welsh's favorite beachside town.

"We can start telling each other about a story or topic on a Monday and pick up the conversation on a Friday," says Mora-Lopez of Welsh. "[During COVID-19], he's been a lifeline and keeps me sane. We both have a sarcastic personality and look at things similarly."

"She's very serious and knowledgeable but can also be a lot of fun," Welsh says of Mora-Lopez. "She's a witty, really great woman."

If it sounds like Mora-Lopez and Welsh have a romantic relationship, think again. Mora-Lopez is still getting over the death of her male partner four years ago—and Welsh, who has also been single these past few years, is gay. The bond they have may be strong—especially since the coronavirus pandemic struck—but it's strictly platonic.

"I told him, 'I just want somebody to be a friend and go to the movies with,'" says Mora-Lopez. And Welsh says of her, "We don't always agree, but there's nothing hidden with her—and that's why she's my best friend."

Xio Mora-Lopez (left) and Ray WelshBill Wadman

Different Kinds of Intimacy

Mora-Lopez and Welsh have found intimacy and connection without sex. Having that special someone you can talk to, take a walk with, grab an outdoor bite with and even share a (masked?) hug with is just as important as “getting some” in this most extraordinary time.

That said, COVID-19 has indeed complicated dating for people living with HIV. For many long-term survivors, this new pandemic is uncomfortably reminiscent of the days before biomedical HIV prevention, when the risk of transmitting the retrovirus hung over the possibility of nearly every intimate encounter, much as SARS-CoV-2, the novel coronavirus that causes COVID-19, does now.

“For people living with HIV, the COVID era is just another burden we have to deal with,” says Perry Halkitis, PhD, a long-term HIV survivor. He is dean of the Rutgers School of Public Health in New Jersey and director of its Center for Health, Identity, Behavior and Prevention Studies.

“But COVID does add yet another layer of negotiation and discussion around sex and intimacy,” Halkitis adds. “Safer sex was in some ways simpler with HIV—just wear a condom! But even kissing is a COVID risk, so it’s a whole different thing.”

Lots of folks have cut back their hookups during the new pandemic. Many people aren’t hooking up at all. And that has been challenging because, let’s face it, we all need nookie. As Madonna sagely points out in her song of the same name, it’s human nature!

“I’m just not winning in this area,” says Atlanta’s Jericho Brown. In 2020, he won the Pulitzer Prize

for poetry for his incredible collection titled The Tradition. “I’m not having any more one-night stands, and I’m not going anywhere I could meet a person.” Like many other people living with HIV, Brown says he isn’t even looking for dates or sex in the COVID-19 era.

Some people say their love life was essentially nil before COVID-19, never mind after. And others say COVID-19 stalled it. “I was dating this one guy I knew from college for a bit,” says Dakotah, a young woman from Charleston, South Carolina. “He lives in California, and I went out to visit him in February. When I got back, he was planning to come visit me in March or April, but then COVID hit hard, and he couldn’t travel, so it just kind of fizzled out.”

That scenario was echoed by Tomas Greiner of Daytona Beach, Florida, who leads a virtual support group for people living with HIV, like him. “I’ve heard from many members that meeting people and starting new relationships has become difficult, if not obsolete.”

Especially for older folks, Greiner says, “technology is a struggle. They don’t always understand how it all works with social media.” Younger folks, he says, “are having it easier with dating apps, yet they’ve still cut back on encounters to limit exposure to COVID.”

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Married Bliss?

In the time of the new coronavirus, many say they wish they were in a relationship so they could enjoy that built-in companionship. And it’s true that some folks with HIV who have partners say the COVID-19 era has been good for them.

Take Jimmy Mack and Brian Mott, two long-term HIV survivors in Southampton, New York. “COVID has only made our relationship stronger,” Mack explains. “As Brian always says, ‘We’ve been through worse!’ I adore my husband for his strength, as he’s been through a lot in 2020, and he did it with such grace and dignity. I also still think he’s the sexiest man I know, and I am so blessed to be married to him.”

Mott concurs. “I rated our relationship a solid 10 before the new pandemic, and the pressures and fears of COVID have pushed us up to a 17 or 18!”

Other couples say they haven’t had it so easy. In New York City, long-term HIV survivor Ivy Arce admits that being stuck in the house during COVID-19 with her husband and two kids has ultimately brought them all closer—but it has hindered “intimate time” between her and her hubby.

“We’re just not in the mood because we’re tired and overwhelmed with politics and the world

coming apart," she admits. "There's a lot of pressure with work, losing work, the kids worrying about bringing COVID into the house and affecting me. No one feels sexy in these moments. Sex is easier when things are less volatile."

Michael Crumpler, who also lives in New York City, says COVID-19 has brought challenges to him and his partner, who ordinarily have a happily open relationship. But these days, he says, "I've chosen not to engage in anonymous sex to reduce the likelihood of getting COVID. I've privileged my love for my partner over the need or desire to have the kind of sex I deeply enjoy. I've chosen not to sacrifice intimacy by behaving in a way that would make either of us insecure."

But that choice, Crumpler says, has made them realize that "we don't have sex as much as we would like or need to" and that they must put more work into "understanding what each other's sexual needs and fetishes are." Still, he says, "I've become more comfortable in our relationship by experiencing what it's like to be together without interruption."

Connection Amid COVID-19

Some single folks are making new connections despite the latest pandemic. In Palm Springs, California, long-term HIV survivor Jeff Taylor says that once COVID-19 started, he stopped hooking up with his regular group of sex buddies. "It took me back to the 1980s, when I shut down and stopped having sex," he says.

Recently, Taylor says, he hooked up again with one of those buddies—his first sex in six months. "It was glorious," he exults. "A huge release." Beforehand, he says, they talked through their COVID-19 risk until they both felt they were making a reasonable choice. "So now I'm starting to think about creating a 'sex bubble' with some of my more trustworthy buddies," he says.

In San Francisco, Ray (not his real name) recently fled New York City not only to avoid COVID-19 but to try to kick crystal meth. He admits that he ended up having meth-fueled sex with lots of new faces. Then, he says, he hooked up with someone he liked who not only wanted to quit meth as well but also needed a roommate after his previous one lost his job as a waiter due to COVID-19 and moved out.

So Ray is moving in with him. "We're very compatible sexually and both very lonely," he says. "You have to get creative about a strategy for getting through this time. It's about survival. And he drives a motorcycle."

They're not alone in their approach. According to Halkitis, many folks with HIV are forming "sex pods" of one or two people to minimize COVID-19 risk, just as many people have created family or social pods. "Create a group of people whom you trust, and set up rules and expectations," he says. "That's a much better strategy than just porn. We all want human touch."

Figuring It Out

Meanwhile, outside Boston, a young woman named Casey says she had stopped dating pre–COVID-19 because she was tired of the mixed results she got after disclosing her HIV-positive

status. But in August 2020, she wanted to start dating again, so she hopped on some apps, which led to FaceTime conversations with a few guys, then meeting up outside.

Then she narrowed it down to one guy and invited him to her place. “I took a calculated risk,” she says. “Everything’s a COVID risk, including dating someone who’s HIV positive, right? I’d been getting COVID tested in school, and I knew my immune system was in good shape.”

They’ve been meeting up once a week at her place. “I feel really good about how it’s going,” she says. “It’s improved my mood so much. Even just passing time on the phone with him makes me feel less alone.”

As do those weekly get-togethers and near-daily phone chats between New Jersey’s Mora-Lopez and Welsh, which prove that, even though sex may be the cherry on top of intimacy and connection, it’s intimacy and connection we need first and foremost.

“He keeps me grounded and able to say, ‘OK, we can get through this,’” says Mora-Lopez. And even more than hanky-panky, isn’t that really what everyone needs—now more than ever?

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