# Black Swan & HIV

January 25, 2011 By Shawn Decker

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**I finally managed to see Black Swan, which is one of those movies I was excited to see until it got overexposed, as if something popular somehow loses it's ability to be any good. That just isn't true, but my subconscious movie buzz does seem to suffer if I hear *too much* about a movie before seeing it, or see too much when a trailer reveals every decent scene or character's intention.**

So, consider this sentence my spoiler alert. **SPOILER ALERT.** There, that's better.

Not much to spoil by now. Black Swan is the tale of a dancer, Natalie Portman, trying to make the best of a wonderful opportunity as the lead in Swan Lake. Since my blog really shines when I make everything about HIV, I'll focus on why this movie is really about new HIV infections...

*huh?*

Portman's character is a very sheltered young woman, probably in her early twenties. She still lives with mom, has a lot of dolls in her room and even a little ballerina music box by her bed. As she becomes obsessed with her new role and strives for perfection, she rebels against her coddling mother and her own self-image by cutting loose one evening with a fellow dancer. Things get *way* out of hand, and Portman is left the next day with a hangover and wondering whether or not she slept with two men or her friend.

Or all of them.

Oh, and mom- she's really pissed off, too.

Her character's dramatic metamorphosis from sheltered girl to risk-taking party animal does provide a glimpse into how quickly a sexual awakening can occur. In terms of HIV, there's an assumption that the newly infected, particularly if they are under the age of 24, are all just wild party animals asking for trouble. But it only takes that one weekend of dropping your guard- or a pill into your drink as Portman's character did- to put yourself at risk..

The movie made me think: a lot of parents lock their children up, thinking it will keep them safe from the world. But you can't lock a human's own humanity out of them. Those thoughts and a curiosity about sex are going to happen, and the best way to protect them is sharing important information at each appropriate place during their emotional development. I can't imagine it's easy to figure out the right time to have the right conversations, but a gradual building of trust and a comfortable and non-judgmental attitude about talking about sex shouldn't be as hard as it seems to be for a lot of folks. The idea should be to create that trust, and hope the child comes to you with those questions instead of just

firing out lectures hoping that one or two take.

There's no follow-up on whether there were any consequences to that wild night in the movie, of course, but it did make me think as an HIV educator.  When sex education in public schools has been removed, and parents in general aren't having the conversations they need to be having to fill in those gaps, what can be done to make people less inclined to engage in risky behaviors as a way of discovering the unnecessarily guilty pleasures of sex?

The whole issue of sexual health isn't a black swan, or a white swan.  It's gray. And by sharing our own experiences (as positoids and negatoids, and also as parents who were once teenagers and need to remember that) we can help each other add some color to that dreary gray swan.

Positively Yours,
Shawn

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