Monkeypox is traumatic for older gay men. Here's why.

Monkeypox unearths our fear of being disfigured and the unease that it might actually be punishment for our wicked ways.

July 21, 2022 By Mark S. King

Gay men of a certain age are experiencing this latest viral outbreak with an added layer of distress. Monkeypox, and the skin lesions that it brings, can burrow into our emotional memory, deep down where our recollections of early AIDS reside. And there lies trauma. The revolt of our own bodies, our fear of being disfigured, the unease that it might actually be punishment for our wicked ways.

The skin lesions then were known as Kaposi sarcoma (KS), an AIDS related condition that most likely meant we were months from dying. If we hadn't yet had a KS lesion, we engaged in daily, nerve-wracking examinations in the shower to see if our moment of reckoning had arrived.

Is monkeypox deadly, as AIDS was in those days? Nope. But that hardly matters to a gay man who made it out of the 1980s alive and carries a scar deep inside that feels like it's being slowly torn open.

Filmmaker and AIDS historian Leo Herrera has a powerful new podcast, "A Bumpy Ride," in which he muses on the social impact and sexual politics within the gay community that the monkeypox outbreak has wrought.

You have not heard anything like it. Leo finds an emotional center to the monkeypox outbreak by focusing on its impact on not-so-deeply-buried trauma. Get your monkeypox epidemiology elsewhere; this is about escaping an epidemic that killed your friends and then, decades later, finding yourself chatting with a new batch of friends about who just found a lesion on their body.

Episode 1 includes tremendous wisdom and empathy – toward the sex lives of gay men, our endless capacity for feeling shame and unworthiness, and for our ability to help one another anyway – and Leo's integrity and the simple questions he poses will stop you in your tracks.

Episode 1 of "A Bumpy Ride" is above and runs a fast 15 minutes. Below is an edited version of the text. Treat yourself to Leo's recording if you can, and follow him on social media.

Thanks for paying attention, and please be well.

Mark

Episode 1, A Bumpy Ride (Edited text)

My name is Leo Herrera, and you're listening to "A Bumpy Ride."

I arrived in Berlin about a month ago, May 27. There were 30 cases. And it has now gone from 30 cases to 850 in Germany. Berlin being the sexual playground that it is, this was not the vacation that I had planned. I found myself with one of my favorite people in Berlin, and we were outside having a beautiful Turkish meal. Everybody around us was having a wonderful time. And the conversation, faster than I thought, turned to monkeypox. And he opened with, "so and so found a lesion today."

Lesions have been the conversation topic for about ten days now. How to spot them, how to not spot them, the morning checkups, the mosquito bite that I got at the lake that sent me into a 15 minute spiral. All of the things that we did 12 days prior, which put us all into the window of danger for this.

People dealing with lesions on their face is something that historically digs into the root of so much of our trauma, so much of our sexual shame. And so much of the medical negligence that we've had to deal with. So this is the last thing I want to be talking about. I'm supposed to be running around in Berlin's sexual playground and having a really good time.

I'll be real honest with you, I'm fucking freaked out. This isn't fun. This isn't the kind of cloud chasing social media blitzkrieg campaign that I want to be on. When it comes to people like me, men who have sex with men, we get left real fast, and we get stigmatized, and we get scapegoated all the time. But we don't get to pick when Mother Nature comes knocking. So I'm just waiting.

Then I got a message from one of the biggest porn stars in the world letting me know that they were on week two of monkeypox and asking if I could call him. It was eye opening. I wanted to reach across the phone and give them a big hug. When he got diagnosed with it he was treated like shit by the health department. And you know what a porn star doesn't like? Lesions on his face.

And he was sobbing on the phone, and he was saying, “they’re on my fucking face, Leo, they’re on my fucking face.”

And that’s when I realized we might be in for something that is outside of our mental and emotional capacity. Right now, my DMs are full of people letting me know just how fuckin scary this thing is, and how scary it looks. This also has the potential to be really, really traumatic.

We already have issues associating sex with body horror, it’s been in our history for a really long time. And whether it was because of disease or what other governments did to us, because of our sexuality, body horror is an association that we have with our sexuality from the very beginning. So it’s really important for us to talk about these things.

When somebody gets COVID, you can’t shut them up about it online. We get pics of the little test, the little still life with the test and the bottle of wine, to let everybody know you got COVID in 2022. We get it. Literally, we all got it.

So the question for today is, if you were to have monkeypox right now, why wouldn't you tell people on the internet in the same way that you would if you got COVID? What is in there for you to unpack? What does that tell you about who you believe that you are and what you've done to "deserve it"?

The most important thing that I once asked an (older queer) activist: I asked him, "Do you think AIDS was a punishment?" And I knew that that might be an inappropriate thing to ask a 65 year old man who had seen so much. And he very matter of factly said, "AIDS was not a punishment. AIDS was neglect. We were neglected. And we were left to die. And they allowed this virus to run rampant and to kill so many of us." So one thing that's really important to remember from HIV and absolutely from COVID Is that neglect is at the root of why these things happen.

We don't know where this journey is going. Hopefully nowhere. Hopefully the vaccines are deployed fast. Hopefully this little brush fire that we're having gets burnt out fast. But for now we're on this bumpy ride. So

remember to keep an eye on the numbers in your community. Do some body checks, but don’t freak yourself out too much. And if you’re someone who has been dealing with the homophobia from the health agencies, please start letting people know, these agencies always need to be held accountable for the way that they treat us.

We are now in a holding pattern waiting for the WHO to declare an emergency, waiting for governments to fucking pass out these vaccines that are stockpiled already. So just keep an eye out on how different things would look like if it wasn’t just us. And make sure that you pass around information to one another as much as possible.

Because really, as a community, we are really fantastic at taking care of one another. And this is going to be one of the biggest opportunities that we’ve had in a long time to do so. Hopefully, we won’t be on this bumpy ride for too long.

Leo Herrera

There are new episodes of A Bumpy Ride available to hear for free.

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http://beta.docker.poz.com/blog/monkeypox-traumatic-older-gay-men