

# Life on the Down Low

## **What is the “Down Low?”**

- Suggests discreet, private, or secretive behavior. (T2B2.org School of Public Health, University at Albany 2005)
- Used to describe behavior of men who have sexual relations with other men as well as women and do not consider themselves gay or bi-sexual. (CDC 2006)
- Most commonly associated with, but not limited to homosexual men of African American descent. (T2B2.org 2005)
- Also referred to as being on the “DL,” or on the “low low.”(CDC 2006)
- The men who live on the “down low” usually live secretive double lives, outwardly heterosexual. These men usually have girlfriends or are married, but also have sexual relations with men. The phenomenon is more common among black men than whites. (NY Times 04/03/01; Linda Villarosa: The Body.com HIV/AIDS Resource Center for Women 2001)
- Black men who engage in homosexual behavior are less likely to identify themselves as gay or bi-sexual as men of other ethnicities who engage in the same behavior. (Young Men’s Survey 2001: T2B2.org 2005)
- The cause of this secret lifestyle may stem from views on homosexual labels and homosexuality: the term “gay” did not fit this group personally or socially; the thought that “gay” or “homosexual” inferred passive/ submissive roles. Religious doctrines and religion impact this perception. (T2B2.org 2005)
- “The belief that continual homosexual practice makes a person homosexual...occasional homosexual practice does not...” also contributes to the DL lifestyle. (T2B2.org 2005)

## **Problems Associated with Living on the Down Low**

- A study published by the American Medical Association called young bisexual men a “bridge” for HIV transmission to women. In that study, one in six men who had sex with men had recently had sex with women. Nearly twenty-five percent of those men had recently had unprotected sex with both men and women. (NY Times 04/03/01; Linda Villarosa: The Body.com HIV/AIDS Resource Center for Women 2001)

- The CDC is not totally convinced with the “bridge theory.” They state that some women have become infected through sexual contact with bisexual men. However, the CDC has five questions that need to be answered before stamping their seal of approval to the notion.
  1. Do bisexually active men account for more cases of HIV infection in women than do men who inject drugs?
  2. Are bisexually active men more likely than other groups of men to be HIV infected?
  3. What proportion of HIV infected men who have sex with male and female partners identify with the down low?
  4. Do men on the down low engage in fewer or more sexual risk behaviors than men who are not on the down low?
  5. Do people other than bisexually active men who do not disclose their behavior to sex partners identify with the down low?(CDC2006)
- A problem with the down low that the CDC does recognize is that the men participating in those behaviors who do not consider themselves gay or bisexual may miss prevention and health messages directed to openly gay men.(CDC 2006)
- The secretive lifestyle, not sharing sexual history, unprotected sexual intercourse with multiple partners, and the lack of HIV/STD testing is obviously not concurrent with “healthy” living. The main Problem with living on the down low is that the participants do not want to be identified, thus do not seek help or programs that might keep them or their partners HIV/STD free.

## Epidemiological Picture

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## Solutions and Programs

- The CDC offers the following resources, groups and effective interventions for males who have sex with males who do not consider themselves gay or bisexual:
  - **Many Men Many Voices**- a group STD/HIV prevention intervention for gay men of color and men who have sex with other men but do not identify themselves with being gay or bisexual

- **Mpowerment-** A group which comprises HIV prevention, safer sex, and risk-reduction messages in a community building format for young MSM
  - Popular opinion leader- which involves identifying, enlisting, and training key opinion leaders to encourage safer sex as the norm in the social networks of the MSM
  - Healthy Relationships- Which help develop the skills and self-efficacy of people living with HIV/AIDS
  - **Peers Reaching Out and Modeling Intervention Strategies (PROMISE)**, which uses peer advocates (including MSMs who do not identify themselves as gay) to help people adopt practices to reduce or eliminate risk factors of HIV infection. (CDC 2006)
- The main problem that faces those who live on the down low is that there is not enough information pertaining to the subject. Since the participants usually keep their lifestyles secretive, it is quite difficult to obtain pertinent data on the DL's effects. Even if there were more data those on the low low most likely would not seek it out for fear of being outed.

## Internet Resources

- **About.com Gay Life:**  
<http://gaylife.about.com/cs/mentalhealth1/qt/dltip.htm>  
 This Web site, though not certified through any medical boards, offers advice to those affected by life on the down low. It brings into play some conversation starters, and tips on how to deal with a mate who may be living on the DL and links to discussion areas
- **Third Thursday Breakfast Broadcast: University at Albany, School of Public health:** <http://albany.edu/sph/coned/t2b2hivprev05.htm> - this link brings you to an interesting satellite broadcast from September '05. The topic: Is HIV Prevention Targeting Men "Living on the Down Low" an effective Strategy for African Americans?

## Bibliography

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- Third Thursday Breakfast Broadcast: University at Albany, School of Public health:  
Satellite broadcast, September 15, 2005  
Speakers: David J Malenbranche, MD, MDH, Assistant Professor, Division of General Medicine, emory University School of Medicine  
Darrel Wheeler, PHD, MPH, ACSW, Associate Professor, Hunter College School of Social Work  
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<http://www.albany.edu/sph/coned/t2b2hivprev05.htm>

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