



BROTHERS FOR LIFE

What are multiple sexual partners and why are they risky?

The term multiple sexual partnerships means quite simply, having more than one sexual partner, this can either be at the same time, or one after each other over a short period of time. Being sexually active already exposes one to the risk of HIV, having multiple sexual partners multiplies one's risk tremendously. With every person you have unprotected sex with, you are choosing to expose yourself to every other person they have had sex with – this sexual network can quickly equal having indirect sex with hundreds of people whose HIV and STI statuses you don't even know. So why in the face of such tremendous risk do men still choose to have multiple sexual partners? According to the 2012 National HIV Communications Survey, 27% of men between the ages of 20 and 24 are involved in multiple sexual partnerships, whereas approximately 8% of women in the same age bracket are said to be involved in MSPs.

What causes men to have multiple sexual partners? Is sex the driving factor?

In South Africa, many people would likely believe that men are driven by “uncontrollable sexual urges and the cultural legacy of polygamy”¹. Whilst women might be seen as acting out of financial necessity as well as male domination or coercion. Let's look at some of the driving factors of multiple sexual partnerships now.

Gender roles in South Africa

Research showing how the role of gender affects sexual behaviour in South Africa is well documented². Traditionally, young South African women have faced strict challenges when negotiating the arena of sexuality. There are unwritten rules they must abide by, such as being modest in their behaviour, protecting their virginity, and avoiding sexual relations until in a long-standing relationship. Men on the other hand, are actively encouraged to show their manhood and virility through sexual experimentation and multiple partners. There is also a strong belief that men should be firmly in control of sexual interaction with women. These roles can in many cases make women feel powerless to say no to a man who wants sex, and in the same way, make a man feel as if he does not sleep with many women, then he is not really a man at all. When it comes to the issue of Polygamous marriage, according to University of Pretoria research associate Leslie Mxolisi Dikeni, “On paper there is total emancipation of women, but traditional forms of polygamy are not allowing for that. Even in so-called equal polygamous marriages, there's innate gender imbalance between the husband and his wives.”

¹ (Shelton, 2009: 367)

² Gender dynamics in the primary sexual relationships of young rural South African women and men



Fortunately, evidence shows that these traditional gender roles within South Africa are beginning to evolve, some men are showing a newly found tolerance and respect for women – something we at Brothers For Life actively support.

Financial Incentives

The word Sugar Daddy is something well known to most South Africans – the term refers to a man who can afford to pay for material goods and expenses in exchange for sex. Research has shown that a concerning proportion of South African women are indeed involved with men who could be classified as sugar daddies³. Acts of transactional sex can be even more risky than mutually agreed upon sexual encounters because the decision to use condoms is left almost completely up to the sugar daddy.

Relationship Dissatisfaction

Whilst South Africa's history of polygamy, the roles of established gender norms, and the financial allure of sugar daddies undoubtedly play a large role in why people have multiple sexual partners, research conducted by The Soul City Institute for Health and Development shows that there is far more individual choice involved than just these factors alone⁴. The ten-country study conducted in Southern Africa showed that both men and women reported that dissatisfaction with their primary relationship was the predominant cause of MSPs. This dissatisfaction related to various issues including a lack of communication and romance, a partner's lack of skill in lovemaking, monotony, domestic disagreement, and desire for variety in partners and sexual practices.

Other reasons documented throughout the MSP literature include: insurance against the loss of one's main partner, a better strategy to find one's right life partner, physical separation (especially due to work), peer pressure, revenge in response to a partner's infidelity, and interestingly, according to women, the modern belief that women can behave like men with regards to their sexual partners^{5,6}.

So there's no doubt that spontaneous sexual urges and societal pressures play a large role in multiple partners, especially when alcohol is involved, but from what the research tells us, it's not the primary cause. Dissatisfaction with certain aspects of a relationship can incentivise people to seek out affection or comfort from multiple sources, so always make time to talk things through with your partner. Research into the drivers behind homosexual infidelity or multiple sexual partners is still limited, but many of the reasons discussed above can likely cut across boundaries of sexual orientation and apply to heterosexual and homosexual couples and

³ Transactional sex among women in Soweto, South Africa: prevalence, risk factors and association with HIV infection.

⁴ One Love. Multiple and concurrent sexual partnerships in Southern Africa: a ten country research report. 2008. <http://www.soulcity.org.za/research/research-reports/soul-city-institute-regional-programme/soul-city-institute-regional-programme-2002-2007-impact-evaluation-summary>

⁵ (Shelton, 2009: 368)

⁶ Research report: concurrent heterosexual partnerships, HIV risk, and related determinants among the general population of Zimbabwe. Feb 12, 2008. <http://www.psi.org/hiv/resources/Research-report-CSP.pdf>



individuals.

Reducing your risk

No relationship can survive without mutual communication. It is very important to talk to our partners about everything, including our sexual needs and desires, the more you communicate about what makes both of you happy in bed, the better your sexual life will be.

If you're single, think about why it is that you feel the need to have multiple sexual partners, understand that sleeping with many women does not make you more of a man, all it really does is put your health at risk. Try find someone whose company you enjoy, get to know them, and eventually go get tested together before having sex. Temptations are always there, but put your health, your partner's health and family's health before momentary satisfaction. If you're not into commitment, then at very least, wear a condom correctly and consistently.

Why is it more important to wear a condom when I have multiple partners - tell us about the Window Period?

Besides not knowing the sexual histories of the people you are sleeping with, if you have unprotected sex with someone who has recently contracted HIV this will increase your risk of infection significantly. The stage right after someone has been infected with HIV is called the window period - remember at this point even if this person would test for HIV, the test would come up as negative. During this time the infected person can spread the HIV virus far easier than any other time in their lives. Having unprotected sex with multiple partners exposes the entire sexual network to the heightened risk of HIV infection due to the ease with which the virus can spread during this time.

Conclusion

Whilst sex definitely is a major factor in why some people choose to have multiple partners, our discussion here today has shown that there are in fact many different reasons why people might choose to live their lives this way. The truth of the matter is this, whatever your reason might be, whether you're single, or whether you're in a relationship, having multiple sexual partners is taking a bet with your life, a bet that you're probably going to lose. Don't be foolish, think about the consequences of your actions before you act, and if all else fails Brothers...wear a condom!