



Straight Men Who Have Sex with Men (SMSM)

by Joe Kort

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Men Who Have Sex with Men (MSM) is a term derived from the growing body of literature showing that not all men who have sex with men are gay. Adopted by sex researchers and AIDS organizations to classify men who have sexual relations with other men but whose sexual identity is neither gay nor bisexual, the acronym recognizes a reality that complicates our tendency to divide the world into heterosexuals and homosexuals, with a small number of bisexuals, who are sometimes thought of as simply gay men or lesbians who have not come to terms with their homosexuality. That is, the reality of sexual activity is more complicated than the traditional binary (or even trinary) system of nomenclature can accommodate.

This article focuses on straight men who have sexual relations with men (SMSM). They are not gay nor are they bisexual, though their behavior might be seen as bisexual or homosexual.

The SMSM phenomenon has become so widely recognized that even Oprah addressed the issue when she interviewed J. L. King who originally exposed this lifestyle in the Black community with his breakout bestseller, *On the Down Low: A Journey into the Lives of "Straight" Black Men Who Sleep With Men*. Keith Boykin's *Beyond the Down Low: Sex, Lies, and Denial in Black America* also confronts SMSM among African Americans. However, the "down low" syndrome is by no means confined to the African-American community. SMSM exist in all races, ethnicities, religions, and socio-economic classes.

The number of straight men who have sex with men is difficult to gauge with precision, but it is believed to be surprisingly large. According to the Centers for Disease Control, more than 3,000,000 American women are sexual partners of men who secretly have sex with other men, though this figure also includes bisexual men and closeted gay men.

The SMSM phenomenon is not new, though it has only recently received much media attention. In earlier generations, these men may have been described as "trade"--heterosexual men who participated in same-sex sexual encounters of a restricted kind, often taking the active role in anal intercourse and the passive role in fellatio.

They may have been sex workers or men who engaged in sexual relations with other men only because female partners were not available (as in the case of prisoners or men who live in all-male environments). They may have engaged in sexual activity with other men as runaway teenagers living on the streets for survival or as young men out on a lark.

These men may have cruised for same-sex encounters in public parks or restrooms, but they were unlikely to become part of a gay community except on its fringes.

More recently, the growth of the Internet has facilitated the acting out of sexual fantasies of all kinds, including those of SMSM. The Internet has made it easier and safer for heterosexually-identified men to meet other men for quick, anonymous sex. Hence, there may be a growth in the number of men who experiment with same-sex desire without altering their sexual identities.

Moreover, some gay men fetishize the idea of having sex with straight men. Again, the Internet and other anonymous venues help connect these gay men with straight men willing to have sex with other men. The attraction of some gay men for straight men may explain in part the continuing phenomenon of cruising public rest rooms and parks even as the stigma against homosexuality has lessened. One is more likely to find available straight men in such relatively anonymous venues than in gay bars and clubs.

Why Would Straight Men Have Sex with Other Men?

There are a number of reasons why straight men might have sex with other men. These reasons range from situational homosexuality to sexual addiction. In general, SMSM behavior is about physical release and sexual behaviors, not about attraction or desire for another man. The attraction is toward the act or the body (or body parts) of the male not the other man himself.

Straight men who have sex with other men often have high sex drives and are easily aroused sexually. They may seek out connections with men for a quick and easy sexual release in which they are not required to engage emotionally or to risk their identity as a heterosexual man.

Some SMSM might be described as "Hetero-Emotional and Homo-Sexual." These are men who are romantically attracted to the opposite sex but whose predominant sexual arousal is by other men. They are usually heterosexually married and in love with their wives, but nevertheless feel sexually driven by a need to have sex with other men.

Other SMSM are socially phobic and have inadequate skills necessary to flirt with and connect to women. They may have such extreme anxiety that they find their sexual release with other men due to the ease and lack of social skills necessary to have a sexual hook-up through the Internet, rest areas, parks, and other places men cruise for sex with other men.

Usually, SMSM are turned off and left cold by images of naked men. Instead, they are sexually aroused by and attracted to women. Hence, their interaction with men is typically less about sexual desire for their partners than a desire to experiment or fulfill particular sexual fantasies, including fetish interests.

They may be strongly compelled and interested in various sexual experiences that may be labeled as homosexual (such as an interest in anal intercourse, especially if they desire to be penetrated, or fellatio). To fulfill these interests, they may seek out gay men, whom they perceive as less judgmental than women and more open to sexual experimentation without commitment.

Some SMSM may want to bond with and need affection from other men and find that they can achieve this through sexual interaction with other men. Some heterosexual men who feel that they did not receive sufficient affection and attention from their fathers seek sex with men as a way of finding male nurturance and acceptance. These men may prefer that the bonding remain nonsexual but cannot obtain intimacy except through sexual relations.

Some SMSM are narcissists who have a constant need for attention and acceptance. These men use sexuality with other men as a means of fulfilling their need to be adored and admired.

Some suffer from a form of Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder in which the individual is preoccupied with the possibility that he might be homosexual. These men feel compelled to engage in certain behaviors that make them think that they are gay when in truth they are straight. They find no pleasure in sexual contact with men, but nevertheless are driven to participate in homosexual relations.

Some SMSM are acting out early childhood sexual abuse. If a basically heterosexual boy has been molested by a male relative, when he grows up, he may keep "returning to the scene of the crime" to defuse and desensitize his emotional pain. These heterosexual men are not homosexually oriented and their homosexual behavior has nothing to do with their sexual and romantic identities.

Other SMSM are sexually addicted and are looking for new ways to add to their sexual shame, excitement, and thrill. They compulsively act out with other men as a result of sexual addiction.

Finally, some SMSM enjoy fantasies of--or the reality of--their wives and girlfriends having sex with other men either in front of them, nearby, or with their knowledge about when and where it occurs. They are often sexually aroused by feeling humiliated that their wives or girlfriends are being pleased by another male whom they see as more potent and better endowed.

Other men enjoy being sexual with other men's wives in front of the cuckold husband or at least with his knowledge. Sometimes they engage in sexual behavior with the man but only in the presence of the wife or girlfriend.

The Difference between Gay Men and SMSM

A gay man's sexual orientation is characterized by lasting aesthetic attraction to, romantic love of, and sexual attraction almost exclusively towards those of the same gender. A gay man's sexual thoughts, fantasies, and behavior are aligned. His identity is based on affectional, emotional, spiritual, psychological, and sexual feelings directed exclusively or mostly toward men.

While some gay men can include and enjoy women as part of their sexual fantasies and behaviors (for instance, being sexual with a woman while with another man or experimenting by having sex with a woman), the gay man is mostly if not totally attracted to men.

In contrast, SMSM might fantasize about men, but their primary sexual and romantic attractions are toward women. They are heterosexual men who for a variety of reasons engage in sexual behavior with other men. They are *not* gay, nor are they bisexual, though their sexual behavior includes sex with other men. The key point is that they do not self-identify or see themselves as gay or bisexual.

In understanding SMSM, a significant distinction is that between sexual preference and sexual identity. Sexual preferences are about various desires, positions, and fantasies one might have, whereas sexual identity is about how one self-identifies in terms of straight, gay, or bisexual.

A straight man's sexual behavior with men may reflect a need for quick sexual release or a desire to experiment or an addiction or a complex reaction to past sexual abuse. This behavior sometimes expresses problems and conflicts with their sexual feelings and desires, but it is not an expression of a gay identity.

Is SMSM Behavior Pathological?

While some SMSM behavior has pathological roots that need to be understood, straight men having sex with other men need not be pathological or even motivated by pathological reasons. Gay, bisexual, and heterosexual men are drawn to certain sexual behaviors, fantasies, and desires that they usually experience with little psychological trouble.

Moreover, as Kinsey and his associates documented in the 1940s and 1950s, men and women are capable of

a much wider range of sexual behavior and fantasies than is usually recognized. Homosexually-identified men and women frequently have heterosexual fantasies and heterosexually-identified men and women frequently have homosexual fantasies.

Whatever drives a man to have sex with another man, as long as he is aware of the consequences of his behavior, has his and his partner's informed consent, harms no one else, and is mindful of his partner's integrity, sexual pleasure is its own justification. Moreover, it may even facilitate self-understanding and broaden one's perspective.

However, leading a life on the "down low" can be risky in a number of ways. The secrecy and shame involved may lead to such psychological fallout as depression and low self-esteem, plus many other dysfunctional behaviors such as chemical dependency, sexual addiction, suicide attempts, affairs, and unprotected sex that may result in STDs, including HIV infection.

A good rule of thumb is that if SMSM behavior prevents the development of deep personal relationships or otherwise adversely affects an individual's self-esteem or sense of himself, or causes emotional distress to loved ones, therapy may be helpful. SMSM who do end up in therapy often learn that it is not their sexual behavior that is the problem but how they feel about it.

Some learn that their sexual behavior expresses non-sexual issues or aspects of themselves that need to be addressed or emotional wounds that need to be healed.

A Word about Reparative Therapy

Reparative therapy, which attempts to change an individual's sexual orientation from homosexual to heterosexual, has been widely and rightly discredited. It instills self-hatred in gay men and lesbians.

While practitioners of reparative therapy frequently boast of their success in changing homosexuals into heterosexuals, these claims have not been scientifically verified. While it may be possible to help someone stop acting on same-sex attractions, that is not the same thing as changing an individual's orientation.

It may well be that those who claim that they are "ex-gays" who have been changed from homosexual to heterosexual are simply heterosexuals who were acting out homosexual behavior: that is, they are straight men who had sex with other men.

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Joe Kort is an author, psychotherapist, and teacher in the Detroit area. His books include *10 Smart Things Gay Men Can Do To Improve Their Lives* (2003) and *10 Smart Things Gay Men Can Do To Find Real Love* (2006). His *Gay Affirmative Therapy for the Straight Clinician: The Essential Guide* is forthcoming in 2007. He not only conducts workshops and retreats for singles and couples, but also provides training to straight clinicians about Gay Affirmative Therapy. He teaches Gay and Lesbian Identity Development and Treatment in Wayne State University's School of Social Work.