

Facilitator's Guide



Soft Smoke

AIDS in the Rural West



a video by Jennie Franks and Katie Jewett

Soft Smoke

AIDS in the Rural West

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The Video

Despite repeated proof that the HIV virus can affect anyone, anywhere, many people in rural communities cling to the belief that AIDS is a big city disease, that it only affects gays and drug users, that “it can’t happen here.” As a result, while AIDS is declining a bit in major cities, it is actually on the rise in smaller towns and less populated areas.

Soft Smoke first follows Roy, who works for the Colorado Health Department’s Partner Notification program, traveling the back roads of the state to give people the unwelcome news that they may have been exposed to AIDS. He believes that low self-esteem is behind the risky behaviors that expose so many of his clients to the deadly virus.

In towns where everybody knows everybody else, people who are “different” may feel very isolated and alone. HIV positive for more than ten years, Laurie still feels that she cannot talk openly about her condition in her small community; teenaged Claudia talks about how friends taunted her and were afraid to be around her when they found out she was positive. By contrast Robert, who died soon after this film was completed, became an out-

spoken AIDS activist, hoping he could help young people avoid the disease. Their stories, and the stories of the others profiled in this brief but powerful video documentary, convey a clear prevention message that will resonate with young people anywhere.

Introduction

This video and its accompanying guide are intended to help leaders facilitate an open, honest dialogue. It deals with the lives of young people, in small rural towns, who live and work with HIV and AIDS. Although it was filmed in Colorado, the people and communities seen in this program could be anywhere.

The video focuses on behavior, drug abuse, and self-esteem issues in a sensitive and understanding way. It is designed to help individuals to feel empowered in risky situations, so that they feel able to make healthy, safe decisions.

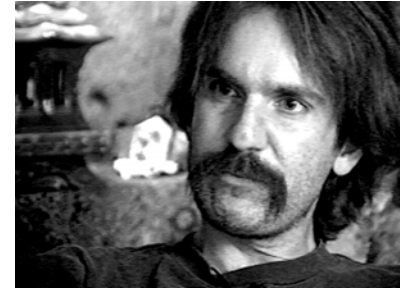
The Facilitator's Guide

This *Facilitator's Guide* offers some suggestions and questions for those of you who plan to present the video and lead discussions about the difficult issues it raises. There may be more questions than you will be able to use. Audiences differ – by age, experience, and many other factors. Facilitators should use their judgment about posing questions and raising issues in an appropriate manner. These questions may generate many different answers from participants, and will hopefully lead to a lively discussion. Feel free to select, modify and build on these suggested topics.

The first set of questions is meant to relax the group and give them time to express their thoughts and feelings. The second set of questions is designed to get the individuals thinking about themselves in relation to the disease. It is important for them to imagine themselves in the position of being HIV positive. The visualization exercise should be the last thing before the group disbands. It is designed to encourage individuals to understand that they do have the ability to control certain events in their lives.

Facilitator Preparation

Please watch the video before you show it to others. Become familiar with the material so you can anticipate questions, etc. It may be helpful to have notes on the film before the discussion starts.



Think about how you will handle some of the difficult questions that participants may have; prepare answers that you will feel comfortable using. You must know how you want to handle these questions so your answers will be open and honest.

Be flexible in leading the discussion. If you have the time, when you hear something moving or something that you think the whole group should discuss in further depth, go with it.

Be sure to leave time at the end of the discussion for the visualization exercise. This has proven to be a powerful component to the video and discussion experience, and should not be missed.

Questions For Group Discussion

1. Why do you think the communities in the video responded to the people in the film as they did? How do you feel about the way these communities responded? How do you think your own community would respond?

Fact: *In rural communities the rate of new AIDS infections has now surpassed those in urban communities. Lack of privacy and fear of losing a job can stop people from being tested. People with HIV often do not tell their family and friends for fear of rejection.*

2. How do young people get infected with the HIV virus? Why do you think some people are infected and others are not?

Fact: *Low self-esteem plays a part in the contraction of the virus. Drugs and alcohol can cloud judgment. If you feel good about yourself, chances are you will protect yourself in risky situations and will not abuse drugs and alcohol, nor indulge in unsafe sexual practices.*

3. What do you think about people who have HIV? Do you think that you could get HIV? What are your risks?

Fact: The fastest growth rate of AIDS is now in women and minority groups. The idea that only homosexuals and drug users get the virus is a fallacy.



4. How hard is it to live with HIV/AIDS? What changes would it make in a person's life?

Fact: A person living with HIV/AIDS in a small town can find it difficult to get adequate medical care. It is impossible to predict how the disease will affect somebody. It can

change and mutate into infections which affect different parts of the body. It is not a disease where you can take a couple of pills and feel fine. Often the pills you take will make you feel sick and distort your body ("protease paunch," for example, which distends the stomach.)

5. Where could the people in the video have gone for help in avoiding the virus, before they contracted HIV?

Fact: They could have found telephone numbers of organizations in the phone book or at the library or on the Internet. There are many organizations, which will answer questions and concerns, such as the American Red Cross and Centers for Disease Control, all in the phone book. The Western Colorado AIDS Project, where Jeff Basinger works, could have helped, and also any local Health Department. All these organizations are trained to help with any social problem or could have directed those seen in the film to other organizations which could have dealt specifically with their particular problems such as drugs, alcohol, sexual orientation, and other concerns.

6. In the video Roy says, "when people use drugs to get high you know that they are really real low." What do you think about that statement? Is the abuse of drugs a self-esteem issue?

Fact: When a person decides to indulge in drugs or alcohol they may be feeling bad or unsure of themselves at that particular time, and not realize that it may be an issue of low self-esteem that influences their behavior. When there is substance abuse, the person often feels depressed when they come 'down,' leading to a pattern of needing more of the substance to sustain a 'high.'

7. What was Roy really saying at the end of the video? Why did he use the allegory of 'soft smoke'? What did that mean to him? What does it mean to you?

Fact: Roy was comparing the soft smoke of a campfire to the soft "inner voice" which we all have. He was saying how important it is to listen to ourselves in risky situations when we feel uncomfortable. We need to understand that if we feel uncomfortable it means that something is wrong. It is a legitimate feeling. We need to be able to voice our concerns and to realize that we are in charge of our bodies, so as not to be pressured into doing something that will put us in danger. This includes the danger of drinking and doing drugs, which can lead to risky behavior such as drunk driving, unsafe sex, and fatal accidents.

Questions for Self-Evaluation

The next set of questions is *not* meant to be answered aloud. The group leader should ask everybody to find a comfortable position, either by putting their head in their arms on their desks or table or relaxing in their chairs. Then the participants should close their eyes. When the group is feeling comfortable and in their own space the leader should begin. The leader should take the time to pose each question in order to give the students time to visualize their answers.

Question One: Imagine how you would react if a friend came to you and told you that he or she had the virus?

- Would you hug them and comfort them?
- Would you feel scared that you were going to become infected, and back away?
- Do you feel comfortable in knowing exactly how the virus is transmitted? If not would you make an effort to find out?

Question Two: Imagine now what your feelings would be if you chose to be tested?

- Would you tell anyone you were going to get tested?
- Would you know where to get tested in your area?
- What thoughts would be going through your head as you waited to be tested?

Question Three: Many people feel that they will never contract the virus. They say, "It will never happen to me." Imagine how you would feel if you did contract it?

- What would your first thought be?
- Do you think anything would change in your future?
- Can you imagine your life living with HIV/AIDS? Think about it: living your life with HIV. Would you be able to tell a friend?
- Think for a moment: what do you think your friends would say to you?

Question Four: Think back to a situation in your past where you have been with your friends and felt uncomfortable.

- What did you do? Were you able to deal with the pressure?
- How did it feel later, after you made your decision? Did you like the way you dealt with it or did you feel uneasy and bad about it.

Question Five: Now think forward to a situation where your peers are pressuring you to do something that you do not feel comfortable doing. It could be friends at a party, or a girl friend or boy friend wanting you to do something that you feel unsure about.

- What would you say to them? Would you just say 'no'? Would you make an excuse?
- Would you try to change their behavior, to make a difference, or would you join in. How would you feel if you joined in?
- Would you realize you had a choice – that it was up to you? That you didn't have to join in?

Question Six: Roy, in the video, compared soft smoke to one's "inner voice," which is called intuition. It is a feeling that we all experience on occasions when we feel uneasy. If we are in touch with our feelings we can recognize it and, more importantly, respect this feeling that tells us something is not quite right.

- Would you recognize your intuition or "inner voice" if you felt it? Do you ever let this feeling guide your behavior?
- Can you remember the last time you listened to your inner voice? How often do you listen to your inner voice: A lot? A little? Never? Or do you ignore it, and only listen to outside voices?

Visualization Exercise

Final Exercise: This last part should be presented slowly, so students have time to visualize and digest the meaning.

- **Feel that you are now a powerful person who is in charge of your life. Nobody else. You alone can make the choices that will keep you safe.**
- **How does that feel? Do you feel content knowing you are in charge of your body and that you can make responsible decisions to be safe and healthy?**
- **When you have found that feeling, hold onto it. In your mind, be aware of what it feels like.**
- **Know that you have that feeling with you always, so that you can always tap into it whenever you need to, especially in situations that you know are risky.**
- **You alone must make these decisions to keep yourself safe. Not your parents, not your teachers, and not your friends.**
- **Still keeping that feeling, and still keeping your eyes closed, sit up slowly; then open your eyes.**

Thank you...

Be safe!

Notes

