

## **Students' podcast transcript: Emotional History: Revisiting the AIDS crisis**

[Ella]

Hello and welcome to our podcast, Emotional History, Revisiting the AIDS Crisis. I'm Ella and I will be the host today. I am joined by Freya, Eboni, Isobel and Polly today.

[All]

Hi!

[Ella]

And as you've probably guessed from the title of this podcast today, we will be discussing the AIDS crisis, which is applicable to the Medicine Through Time GCSE module. And it'll allow the diversification of the history curriculum by introducing more marginalised histories into the classroom.

And today in our podcast, we're aiming to shine a new light onto the responses to the AIDS crisis, but through the lens of emotional history and focusing on emotional responses to the crisis. Isobel, can you tell us a little bit more about emotional history?

[Isobel]

Of course, let's start with Thomas Dixon, who's a historian of emotions. He's written a short introduction into the discipline. He stresses the importance of studying emotions and understanding how radically different emotions were in the past in an attempt to loosen the contemporary psychological hold over us.

What he really means here is that [pause] the study of emotions allows us to truly understand an event, like the AIDS crisis, and assess how people directly impacted by the event felt without looking through the lens of historical hindsight.

[Ella]

So it seems that the history of emotions is an attempt to (sorta) properly understand feelings of the time. And I know that the historian Matt Cook has written a really interesting article about how this emerging field of history can link to the AIDS crisis. Polly, do you have a little bit more on Cook's article itself?

[Polly]

[urm] Yeah, so Matt Cook's Archives of Feeling outlines how the history of emotions specifically relates to the AIDS epidemic and stresses how important this field of history is

when studying moments of crisis. [urm] He ultimately investigates the growing sense of fear and anxiety that occurs both in and out of the gay community.

[Isobel]

Yes, exploring this fear takes up a great part of the article. What I thought was really interesting was how different people responded to this fear. Cook suggests that this led to both an increased pride and shame in being gay.

He investigates this by focusing on an AIDS patient, Mark Ashton, and his peers, looking into how they all experienced the epidemic. So Mark passed away from an AIDS-related illness, and his friend basically felt compelled to lie about his cause of death to her colleagues. Her colleagues soon found out that Mark had actually died from AIDS, and her desk was moved across the office and no one interacted with her.

One of her colleagues even said that he couldn't risk being around her as he had kids.

[Ella]

I mean, that is a really, really powerful example.

[Erm]

Eboni, with that in mind, can you tell us about how Cook actually incorporated this case study into the article itself?

[Eboni]

Yeah, so Matt Cook makes three kind of key arguments, and he uses this story as a backdrop to them. His three main arguments are [basically] how the power of emotions shape the wider responses to the crisis, how communities of feeling formed in response to the fear, and finally the importance of testimonies and studying the history of emotions. I think the first two especially, like the points he makes, are very important in shining a new light on why and how the epidemic sparked certain responses.

[Ella]

So delving deeper into the roles of emotions during the epidemic, I think that assessing the emergence of communities will be a really, really good place for us to start. So throughout the podcast, we will be looking at individual testimonies and experiences of the AIDS crisis itself. But I think it is also important to look at certain factors, you know, the sheer media panic, lingering misconceptions about the disease and those affected, and looking at how this impacted the ways that people did support one another.

So Freya, would you be able to outline just some of the context?

[Freya]

Yeah, of course. [Erm] We can see that particularly in the early 80s, the threat posed by AIDS wasn't necessarily a government priority. As we've seen in Cook's [er] case study, The Office, the attitudes towards AIDS lacked an understanding.

They're often fuelled by fear mongering newspaper headlines and just the general spread of misinformation, which we'll talk a bit more about later. But more importantly, this discriminatory climate created a need for support groups and networks across Britain.

[Isobel]

Yes, so the Terrence Higgins Trust and the Switchboard Helpline, I think are two of the best examples of this support network that was created for the LGBTQ plus community. And both these organisations are still active today. The Terrence Higgins Foundation was a charity established in 1982 to provide support, education, and advocacy for those affected by HIV and AIDS.

It was actually named in honour of one of the first people in the UK to die of an AIDS related illness. It was basically used to provide support for people living with HIV and raise awareness about sexual health and pleaded for changes in media coverage and also for greater government intervention. These things were definitely a necessity at the time.

[Freya]

I agree. Another similar project was the Switchboard Helpline. It was formed in 1974 and it offered a phone number that the LGBTQ plus community could use to speak to volunteers and just receive help and advice about any challenges they faced.

And these problems didn't necessarily have to be related to AIDS. But I think the impact of the helpline is clear when we look at a note left by an employee who details her interaction with one of the callers. She described them as "scared stupid".

I think this clearly shows the emotional support they've provided for those in need, especially those who potentially had nowhere else to go.

[Ella]

Yeah, certainly two very, very important organisations. And were there any other responses that were formed [sort of] within the gay community itself, you know, potentially on a slightly smaller scale, perhaps?

[Polly]

Yeah, so Cook actually looks at quite a few instances of the LGBTQ+ plus community turning inwards for support. It's evident in the Gay Men Fighting AIDS campaign, which saw the publication of a series of posters [erm] which provided advice on safe sex and their message of fighting solely for gay men.

[Ella]

Okay, and sorta circling back to Cook's argument, then, I guess this campaign does clearly demonstrate that there was a sense that gay men were looking out for one another during the crisis. And again, sort of considering the immense social stigmas, and clearly in the switchboard volunteers note, I think, you know, we can all see that the gay community had to look inward for help and support, you know, not outwards. And this did create a sort of sense of community empowerment that Cook does refer to and suggest that it does grow during these moments of crisis.

So zooming out a little bit, do we think that this was applicable elsewhere, you know, this sense of community?

[Freya]

I don't think always. I think we see a lot of conflicting emotions and communities forming during this period. But Cook argued that these emotions were influenced by legislation, by the media and by the press.

So I think, as we see, personal relationships can change as tensions grew between those in and outside of the community as they were fed different pieces of information.

[Ella]

[Hmm] Okay, yeah. And you referred to outsiders there. What [stutter] do you mean when you refer to outsiders in this context?

[Freya]

So I'm mainly talking about people who aren't directly affected by the disease. So think about the church, they had to navigate their conflicting views on homosexuality while still trying to address the epidemic with care. And I think these perspectives are sort of crucial in understanding how interaction shaped individual emotional experiences.

So think if people felt accepted by another community or not.

[Ella]

[Mhm] And again, we are talking about outsiders here. But just to clarify, how [how] do we still shed light on a marginalised piece of history? But looking at outsiders, I mean, I get obviously some historians have suggested that LGBTQ+ plus people were victimised by organisations [sort of] undermining their agency.

[Freya]

Yeah. So I think that when we use this sort of emotional lens to assess the outside responses, we're technically shining a light on the treatment of LGBTQ+ plus people and how this impacted them emotionally. So the attitudes within certain emotional communities would have profoundly influenced individual experiences like through these interactions between people.

[Ella]

Okay, yeah. Thanks, Freya. And what sort of media here, what sort of media influences public emotions?

[Eboni]

So when considering TV adverts, the government's Don't Die of Ignorance campaign showed a large tombstone marked AIDS, which prompted fears and suspicion about those infected or associated with the disease, rather than warning against unprotected sex. Nicholas Roeg's melting iceberg advert also alluded to a sense of dread and limited time. As Matt Cook mentions, information spread quickly and media campaigns clearly influenced public fears.

[Polly]

I think we've got to think about how many people would have been influenced by this as well. [erm] 70% of Radio 1 listeners were aged 16 to 34, and they were seen as more susceptible to the virus. And I think this negative emotional rhetoric was sort of a strategy.

[erm] Fear was being used as a preventative measure, even if it had negative consequences for AIDS patients or the LGBTQ+ plus community.

[Ella]

Yeah, no, no, definitely. And [erm] thinking about the press, was their role any different?

[Ebony]

Absolutely. The press directed some emotional responses to the crisis. Hannah Elizabeth drew attention to their focus on public health concerns.

In a 2021 article, she suggested that a 1987 Brook leaflet called Love Carefully selected emotional language to encourage the practice of safe sex among teenagers. Her main point was that the advert received so much success because it promoted safe sex as an act of love.

[Ella]

So emotional rhetoric [was it] wasn't always negative then?

[Ebony]

Well here, emotions were being used positively. They involved the audience and an emotional community of readers who were apprehensive about the dangers of unsafe sex and transmitting AIDS.

[Ella]

And sorta overall, why did they approach this so differently to the government?

[Polly]

I think probably because other responses had massively stigmatised the disease. [erm] And I think the press intended to sort of counter the fear produced by government led campaigns.

[Freya]

Yeah, I'd say that's right. Legislation definitely drove public anxiety. I mean, think of how many people were being excluded from parts of ordinary life just because they were associated with AIDS.

It would have had such a detrimental impact on their wellbeing, driving them to seek support from the organisations like Switchboard.

[Polly]

Absolutely. [erm] Legislation constantly associated AIDS with danger. And I think when the 1988 Local Government Act introduced Section 28 to stop the promotion of homosexuality, the government sort of created an emotional barrier between members of the public and their existing fears about the virus were only made worse.

And in this context, I think it's crucial to consider how LGBTQ plus voices were silenced and turned to assess emerging scholarship, which sort of more accurately reflects on the individual experiences.

[Ebony]

Definitely. So we could say that emotional rhetoric and actions from above were connected then. Cook also suggested that emotions have enough power to shape wider responses.

I think it's definitely important to recognise Section 28 as a consequence of wider negative emotional rhetoric in the media, as well as its impact as a piece of legislation.

[Freya]

I think you're right. And I guess that by studying these outsider communities, we sort of gain an insight into the emotional states within them. And in turn, we see how these influence the emotions of LGBTQ+ plus people as they interacted with one another.

I think maybe now, though, it's time we actually consider the LGBTQ+ plus responses more closely before we finish the podcast.

[Ella]

So at this point, we have covered a lot of Matt Cook's article. But one of the key points that he does make that we haven't actually discussed yet is how personal testimonies are just so, so crucial for telling a more nuanced and complex story of history. And I mean, especially when it comes to the AIDS epidemic, these personal stories [allow] allow us to trace the history of how people, you know, lived through, resisted, interpreted emotions at the time of the epidemic.

And to allow us to do this, we're going to explore a couple of really, really powerful testimonies from a Guardian article. And we're going to look at the ways in which these stories can reveal the emotional journey of the epidemic itself.

[Polly]

[erm] We spoke earlier about the Terrence Higgins Foundation, and our first testimony actually comes from his partner, Rupert Whittaker. [erm] Rupert's account remembers the loss of his boyfriend, Terry, and how their relationship just became shrouded in fear. And I think Whittaker's testimony sort of sheds a light on just how devastating the epidemic was.

The stigma and isolation faced by individuals and their partners in the early years of the epidemic is just really quite hard to get your head around. And especially when Rupert goes on to recall how Terry's illness actually led to rejection and denial of basic rights. And he notes how AIDS patients were often ostracised.

Having said that, I do think it's important for us to recognise that Rupert's story isn't just one of suffering. It also reflects the resilience of the LGBTQ+ plus community. And he explains how the epidemic forced the community to fight for visibility.

And I think this is important [erm] for us to get to grips with the emotional history of the AIDS epidemic and sort of how we can trace it as a [erm] catalyst for activism.

[Isobel]

Yeah, the second testimony we're looking at comes from a slightly different perspective. A nurse, Jane Brunton. Jane was a nurse working in an infectious disease unit in the late 80s.

She shares the profound isolation and lack of empathy AIDS patients face from medical staff. Many of the patients that Jane was working with were young men. The fear surrounding the disease meant that they were often treated with neglect or just outright cruelty by other hospital staff.

But Jane sort of took a different approach to this. And she worked to introduce gay awareness sessions for the staff and offered emotional support for the patients. This story is definitely important to us. It gives us an understanding of how the medical community had to evolve in its approach to care, moving from neglect and fear to understanding and compassion. I think this highlights the deep emotional toll, not just on the AIDS patients in this case, also the health workers. I think what's most telling about Jane's testimony is how she finds moments of joy in the resilience and spirit of those she cared for.

[Freya]

I think hearing that what's most striking about the testimonials is the common emotions that we encounter. So we see fear, we see isolation, stigma and rejection that are all present. But then we also see resilience, solidarity and hope.

And I think these personal stories ultimately give us more than just facts. They offer an emotional roadmap of the epidemic from confusion and panic and then to the emergence of care and activism.

[Ella]

No, exactly. I mean, I mean, I totally agree. These narratives do provide us with a much more nuanced and a complete sort of human understanding of the epidemic, which is what Matt Cook is referring to. You know, these [these] stories are vital for remembering, you know, not just the events of the past, but the emotional landscapes that did shape them.

With all that in mind, [er] thank you so much for listening to our podcast. We really hope that we have shown how this sort of new emerging field of history and emotional history can be incorporated within the curriculum and within the classrooms and can be used to [stutter] shine a light on a really, really important topic.