



How to Survive a Plague Discussion Guide

Director: David France

Year: 2012

Time: 110 min

You might know this director from:

HOW TO SURVIVE A PLAGUE is David France's first feature-length documentary film.

FILM SUMMARY

HOW TO SURVIVE A PLAGUE addresses the pandemic death associated with HIV and AIDS in 1980's America. Without any explanation or assistance, victims were never offered a real diagnosis. Finding themselves in the midst of a biased and unhelpful community, senators, mayors, even the U.S. President claimed that sufficient action was being taken. Meanwhile, victims went blind and withered away until a group of self-made activists, many who were victims themselves, took matters into their hands to instigate real change. Using amateur videography from a 30-year span, HOW TO SURVIVE A PLAGUE chronicles their trials and successes.

When North Carolina Senator Jesse Helms stood before lawmakers and stated, "There is nothing gay about these people, engaging in incredibly offensive and revolting conduct that has led to the proliferation of AIDS," homophobia and its nasty effects had fatal implications. Hospitals were given incentives not to diagnose AIDS patients, and scientists were not pressed to find a cure. Thus, ACT UP (AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power) and later TAG (Treatment Action Group) were formed, making the impossible possible, demanding more research and drug availability for victims of this horrendously virulent disease.

Incredibly moving and thorough, HOW TO SURVIVE A PLAGUE follows brave activists as they tirelessly present their case across the U.S. and Europe. This film presents a living example of the power of political activism, which in this case has arguably saved over 6,000,000 lives.

FILM THEMES

Both people with AIDS and those without had to face their fears in order to end the AIDS/HIV plague. Fears include: death, rejection, legal reprisal, job loss, not being able to work, social rejection, homophobia, religion, repressed anger and fear of oneself.

THE POWER OF FEAR AND HOMOPHOBIA

In the wake of the AIDS crisis, the very people who inform the masses and put laws in place chose to instill fear and homophobia rather than truth. Roman Catholic cardinals preached that AIDS was a disease of the sinful. Politicians requested that people rethink their sexual preferences in the face of this disease. Riot police wore surgical gloves to protect themselves from ACT UP protesters. These bigoted, uninformed opinions deterred advancements from being made in the field of AIDS research and arguably caused countless unnecessary deaths.

THE POWER OF KNOWLEDGE

With death as the ready-made option offered by the U.S. government for AIDS victims, the only way the HIV-infected community could reach for life was through self-education. They became scientists, learning the chemistry behind HIV, how it multiplies, how it divides, how it kills. They became politicians, learning the legal loopholes and political blockades that prevented the necessary funding for research and kept drugs from being made available to those in dire need. Arming themselves with knowledge, members of ACT UP and TAG waged an unbeatable war.

THE POWER OF POLITICAL ACTION

Dr. Emilio Emini, a pioneer in the field of HIV vaccine research, states in the film that he was on the verge of quitting time and time again. The going was tough, no advancements were being made, and there was seemingly no end to AIDS in sight. Then along came these political activists with fire in their bellies and an undying will to fight until a cure was found – a cure made available to the general public through legal, fair means – which is precisely what they did. An incredible show of determination and conviction stripped AIDS of its ‘plague’ status in the U.S. When those in power do not instigate change, activism does work. In the words of ACT UP’s founding father, Larry Kramer, “Every single drug that’s out there is because of ACT UP, I am convinced. It is the proudest achievement that the gay population of this world can ever claim.”

THE POWER OF DRUGS

Activists waged a war so that people with AIDS could gain access to life-saving drugs, which finally occurred in 1996. Combination drug therapy proved to be a tremendous breakthrough. Within 30 days, the virus was forced into submission and sufferers were returning to health. After 15 years, there was finally light at the end of the tunnel. Though the great battle had been won, many activists found themselves facing a new silent, barren landscape. Most of their friends were dead, and there was no longer a fatal battle to fight. A new struggle began.

“It’s the most frightening medical mystery of our times. And victims must deal with the trauma of being both a patient and a pariah.”

Geraldo Rivera

“It’s like living in a war. All around me, people are dropping dead. You’re scared for your own life all the time.”

Peter Staley

FURTHER DISCUSSIONS:

1. When did you first hear of HIV/AIDS? How did the people in your life react to the onset and development of HIV? Were you taught to fear the disease, or did you receive unbiased information?
2. Do you know or have you ever known anyone with HIV? What is your personal experience with this virus?
3. Have you ever been involved in an activist movement? Do you believe in political activism as a means of kindling real change?
4. Was HIV/AIDS taught in your health class at school? Do you feel you are currently educated on what causes HIV and how to prevent and treat it?
5. Why do you think the U.S. government was so slow in the search for AIDS-related research? Do you believe there were homophobic or religious forces at work in the White House?
6. Have you ever become self-educated in a particular area? What motivated you to seek and learn new knowledge? What did this new knowledge contribute to your life or another person's life?
7. What do you feel is the most important key in stopping the spread of the HIV virus?
8. Do you believe that AIDS will ever be completely eradicated? Or is it a disease that we will live with for generations to come?
9. Since HIV is preventable, should those who contract it be held accountable for their actions? Is healthcare a right or is it something that must be earned?
10. Do you feel the general public is more accepting of people with HIV/AIDS today? Or are they still treated as pariahs in your community?

NOTES:

FILM FACTS:

- Director David France is preparing an ABC TV miniseries version of HOW TO SURVIVE A PLAGUE, which will delve into more personal stories of characters from the film.
- HOW TO SURVIVE A PLAGUE won 12 awards, including the New York Film Critics Circle Award and Best Doc at the Gotham Awards, and it was nominated for an additional 8 awards, including an Oscar for Best Documentary and an Emmy for Outstanding Editing.
- In July 1981, “Rare Cancer Seen in 41 Homosexuals” was published in the New York Times on Kaposi’s sarcoma, an odd cancer that became one of the first recognized HIV viruses. The article put AIDS on the map for the first time.
- Around 300,000 Americans are infected with the HIV virus, but have yet to be tested. National HIV Testing Day has taken place on June 27 every year since 1994 with the aim of educating people to take care of themselves and their partners. “Gay and bisexual men, people with more than one sex partner, people with sexually transmitted diseases, and people who inject drugs are at high risk and should get tested at least once a year,” according to their website.
- Filmmaker David France, initially a journalist, has spent the majority of his career writing about AIDS. A graduate student when the AIDS epidemic hit, France advocated by writing and investigating, and later progressed into film.
- Since the beginning of the AIDS epidemic, almost 75 million people have been infected and 36 million have died of HIV. Sub-Saharan Africa is the most severely affected, with nearly 1 in every 20 adults infected, accounting for 71% of the people living with HIV worldwide.
- In the United States, HIV is mainly spread by having sex or sharing needles to prepare injection drugs with someone who has HIV.
- From a racial perspective, black Americans face the most severe burden. Blacks represent 12% of the U.S. population but account annually for 44% of new infections and 44% of people living with HIV. An estimated 1 in 16 black men and 1 in 32 black women will be diagnosed with HIV in their life. Hispanics are also greatly affected by HIV, representing 16% of the population but accounting annually for 21% of new cases and 19% of the total population living with HIV.
- According to their website, “ACT UP is currently campaigning for a Financial Speculation Tax (FiST), a small tax (0.05% or less) on Wall Street transactions and speculative trades to raise the money needed to end the global AIDS epidemic and provide universal healthcare in the U.S.”
- AZT, the first AIDS drug made available in the U.S. in 1987, cost patients \$10,000 a year, the most expensive drug in history at that point. Nowadays, treatment regimes can cost between \$2,000 to \$5,000 a month.

WAYS TO INFLUENCE

1. Share this film. Give others the chance to expand their knowledge.
2. Educate yourself on the facts surrounding HIV/AIDS. Educate others. Become an informed citizen so that you can affect the AIDS crisis both locally and globally as well as contribute to change the misconceptions and stigma surrounding the illness.
3. Practice safe sex and get tested for HIV. Make sure everyone you come into contact with does the same.
4. Become involved with [Greater Than AIDS](#), which extends HIV messages and community outreach.
5. Become a member of the International [HIV/AIDS Alliance](#), which supports action around HIV, health, and human rights to end AIDS.

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Documentaries provide the perfect topic for meaningful conversations. If you want to talk about the things that matter with people that matter then pick a film, invite your friends, and watch & discuss together. It's as easy as that.

Influence Film Club – We are the conversation after the film.