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## In defense of the foreskin

**"Intact-ivists," a diverse group of men opposed to circumcision, share a common, if unorthodox, mission**

[Stephen Robert Morse](#), Narratively

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Restoring Men.

After twenty-seven years on this planet, I learned last week that I am not only a victim of mutilation, but also an amputee; I just hadn't known it. Like millions of other men, I was, as a baby, circumcised. I never really thought anything of it until my editors directed me to a Yahoo! Group—yes, they still exist—that serves as the online home of the New York City chapter of NORM, the National Organization of

Since the early '80s, men who have been unsatisfied by their “cuts” have banded together for the cause and formed acronym-heavy groups with varying degrees of wit: Brothers United for Future Foreskins (BUFF), UNCircumcising Information and Resources Centers (UNCIRC), and Recover A Penis (RECAP), among many others. The spectrum is wide, yet the mission remains relatively stable: These dudes want their foreskins back, and they want them now. Plus, they don't want any more unsuspecting babies to get snipped.

NORM is the restoration organization that reigns supreme today, with dozens of chapters in seven countries around the world. To complement the techno-prowess of the aforementioned Yahoo! Group, there is also, I kid you not, a [Foreskin Restoration WebRing](#). (For those of you who haven't heard the term since the late '90s, [a WebRing is a collection of websites](#) that are all linked to each other, forming a chain of sites around a central topic, in this case foreskin restoration.)

Though I'd never previously thought about my amputee status/victimhood, while perusing these online forums I discovered there are people who think about their circumcisions every single day—particularly those in the midst of the painful restoration process, which oftentimes means having a [mechanical clamp](#) attached to one's penis for hours at a time over a period of months or even years

Intrigued, I embarked on my Foreskin Restoration Information Deep Gathering Expedition (FRIDGE). If they can do acronyms en masse, so can I. Step one was to attend the monthly meeting of the New York City chapter of NORM, described on its Yahoo! Group as a “community of men seeking to restore our foreskins, an important part of the male sexual anatomy that most of us were wrongfully deprived of at birth.”

\* \* \*

While the origins of circumcision are murky, in terms of both the reasons why cutting began, as well as where and when it first occurred, the practice most certainly dates back several millennia. Of course, circumcision has long been practiced by Jews, Muslims and other groups around the world. As fifth century BC historian Herodotus wrote in his still-widely regarded work, “[The Histories](#),” the Egyptians “practice circumcision for the sake of cleanliness, considering it better to be cleanly than comely.

Records show that other groups from Before the Common Era, including many cultures from across the African continent, circumcised their young. In some cases this is thought to have signified an ascent into manhood (when the act was performed in the pubescent stage) or to discourage masturbation (we all know how well that works...).

In recent years, the ancient practice has found considerable scientific validation from medical professionals, with studies showing that circumcised men may be less likely to acquire sexually transmitted diseases than their intact counterparts—as well as some [highly debatable stats](#) that circumcision may reduce risks of penile and prostate cancer.

The [New York Times reported](#) on August 27 of this year that the [American Academy of Pediatrics](#) had “shifted its stance on infant male circumcision,” announcing that new research, “including studies in Africa suggesting that the procedure [may protect heterosexual men](#) against

H.I.V., indicated that the health benefits outweighed the risks.”

Despite these studies, the fast-growing anti-circumcision movement traces its routes back several millennia as well. “Foreskin restoration also has a history stretching back to the Hellenistic world,” says Daniel O’Neill, a 42-year-old graphic designer who lives in the Inwood section of Manhattan and is the coordinator of NYC-NORM. “Jewish athletes would stretch their foreskin, as circumcision was a much less radical procedure in those days, to fit in. Athletes competed in the nude, and exposing the glans was considered obscene in the Greek world.”



Daniel O’Neill, coordinator of NYC-NORM, at home in Manhattan (Photo by Emon Hassan)

Records of circumcised and uncircumcised men in ancient Greece are of particular interest to the restoration community. A clothing accessory from that era, [the kynodesme](#), has been taken up by the NORM folks as historical evidence of the ills associated with the exposure of the *glans*, or as it is better known, the penis head. Non-Jewish Greeks weren’t circumcised, but it was considered, um, un-Kosher for the glans to be exposed during athletic competitions. Thus, the kynodesme, a leather strap of sorts, was worn by male athletes who lacked sufficient foreskin to cover the entirety of their glans.

The contemporary restoration activists, who call themselves *intactivists*, stand by this ancient belief that the glans should not be exposed, and therefore circumcision is nothing less than mutilation.

\* \* \*

Despite spending years as a kid at Jew-ish summer camp (approximately 97.5% of the attendees were Jewish by my unscientific count) where circumcised penises abounded in the bunks, as a straight man and germaphobe who avoids locker rooms in favor of outdoor exercise I have only seen a handful of my intact brethren. And, truth be told, I’d never wondered much about whether I

was missing out on anything by being cut. I suspect this is the case for the vast majority of cut men.

Until embarking on my research for this piece, I had little idea that the penis in its natural, uncut state, is quite similar to the vagina, whereby it is a moist organ that has some pretty sophisticated and highly sensitive nerve endings. Sounds like something that could be useful. If I weren't circumcised, I would have my very own built-in Manhattan Mini Storage, a place where my glans would be protected from things like touching the interior of my pants, or from that small scrape I gave myself in high school when I accidentally zipped my fly over the glans. As the kind of person who uses a huge shatter-proof case to protect his iPhone, always wears a seatbelt when in a car, and a helmet when on a bike, given the choice I'd like to keep my one-of-a-kind, irreplaceable organ covered, too. Of course, I didn't get to make that choice myself. My parents and a knife-wielding mohel, made that decision for me.

I turned to a Semitic pediatrician friend for literature about circumcision and was promptly handed a copy of "[Jewish Medical Ethics](#)," a definitive volume written by [Lord Immanuel Jakobovitz](#), the now-deceased former Chief Rabbi of the United Kingdom, and an internationally respected public intellectual of the twentieth century. In this work, Jakobovitz writes, "The method to be adopted is laid down thus: 'One excises the foreskin, [that is] the entire skin covering the glans, so that the corona is laid bare. Afterwards, one tears with the fingernail the soft membrane underneath the skin, turning it to the sides until the flesh of the glans appears. Thereafter, one sucks the membrane until the blood is extracted from the [more] remote places, so that no danger [to the infant] may ensue.'"

Objectively, this sounds nothing short of horrific, and if it didn't have a heavy dose of religious backing combined with a loose medical coalition behind it, I imagine the practice might one day be looked back upon as barbaric in the same vein as eugenics, bans on interracial marriage or other once-normal cultural taboos.

The sucking component of circumcision has aroused much (warranted) criticism in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, not only for its obvious pedophilic qualities, but also because of incidents whereby the person performing the sucking [has transmitted an STD to the child](#). Though this part of the procedure is no longer widely practiced, it is still prevalent [in some Orthodox Jewish sects](#). (Take a puke break, then keep on reading.)

Back to me and NORM. After explaining my journalistic affiliations to the NORM-NYC Yahoo Group, O'Neil cordially invited me to sit in on their December monthly meeting.

\* \* \*

## **Tuesday, December 4, 2012**

At seven p.m. on the dot, I enter a high rise building in Hell's Kitchen, where I announce myself to a doorman and proceed to take an elevator to an upper floor. Other than exchanging some email courtesies and getting permission to attend this gathering from O'Neil, I have absolutely no idea what to expect and no idea who these restorers are.

I am greeted by a man who asks me to remove my shoes. I enter a well-kept apartment, realizing I am the first person to arrive. Tom Gualtieri, the host, is in his early forties but looks much younger and has a toned physique. "This is the first time I'm meeting this group," Gualtieri tells me. He's previously only had one-on-one conversations about restoration and participated in online forums

through NYC-NORM and another group, RestoringForeskin.org.

Gualtieri says that he's known he has a problem for his entire life. "My issue was that, at a really young age, when I first started exploring my own body sexually, I just knew there was something missing," he says confidently. "I recognized there was something different about my penis. Even though I hadn't seen other people's penises, there was like an instinctive thing that I knew something was wrong."

"But is this a psychological or physical problem?" I inquire. "What's missing?"

"I can't put my finger on it because I was so young when I started playing with myself. Looking back on it, I was trying to push my penis head back inside my skin. I used to push the glans back into my shaft because I wanted it to be covered up. I guess there's something instinctive about wanting to be protected."

Interesting. Logical. He's not crazy as, I must admit, I suspected some of this group's members to be.

Gualtieri continues: "Also, my father's not circumcised. We were a fairly liberal household, in that I would see men in my household naked, whether when swimming or whatever, and I remember looking at his penis and trying to figure out what was different about it. When I asked him why I was circumcised, my father said, 'That's what you're supposed to do. It's better, it's healthier.' And when you're nine years old, you're like, 'okay.'"

"But when I became sexually active this was not so fine to me. I'm bisexual and recognized that many of my sex partners have been uncircumcised since I was first sexually active when I was nineteen, and I was like, 'Oh, that's what's wrong.'"

The doorman calls up to the apartment. Another guest is heading upstairs.

Nick, twenty-seven, tall, effeminate and good-looking in an almost model-esque way, walks in and introduces himself.

I continue chatting with Gualtieri, asking, "Do you think sex is less pleasurable for you than for your partners?"

"I do," he replies. "But based on what I've read, it's not the amount of pleasure, it's the quality of pleasure. Whenever I have a friend who's going to get their baby circumcised, I say to think logically about what a penis does and what it's built for. If you cut off all that skin, all those nerve endings, and all of that vascularity, it's got to have some effect. I think that sex is less pleasurable."

While there is a dearth of scientific evidence to back up or contradict that statement, many believe it to be true. One 2006 [study of males in Korea](#) who were circumcised after age twenty did find that a majority reported decreased masturbatory or sexual pleasure after being circumcised.

I turn to Nick, the new guy, who says, "I started restoring in college. I studied abroad in London, and I was talking with some English friends of mine. They asked why Americans were all circumcised, and I said I had no idea. So I went home to my dorm and researched online. I'd had difficulties in college with orgasming. I hadn't found oral sex to be particularly stimulating, and sex with a condom was very difficult too. I couldn't climax. I said to myself, 'One day I'll have a boyfriend and I'll have sex without a condom and that will make everything better.' However, the

more research I did, circumcision seemed to be a reasonable cause of this lack of pleasure.”

The doorbell keeps ringing and soon there are eight men present, in addition to me.

The meeting opens, as I’d expect some type of AA meeting to begin, with the group’s leader taking the floor. “I’m Daniel, I’m forty-two,” he says. “I have been restoring now for almost two-and-a-half years. For the extent of time that I’ve been restoring, I’ve been using the dual-tension restorer, or DTR, and the tugging mode more recently to manually inflate the skin. I guess the reason I’m doing it is that I feel like there’s a part of me that’s missing, that should be there, and some sense that I’ve been mutilated.”

Next.

“I’m Nick. I’m 27. I started restoring in college, with tape.” (“Taping” is a basic restoring method in which tape is applied to the foreskin along with an elastic band, working to stretch the skin forward.) “I was taping for a year or two, and I got some pretty good results, surprisingly, using just that method. I just got a DTR. I’m a little uncomfortable, but I’m still getting used to the sensation of that device. I got the DTR because one of my biggest problems with the restoration process is that my scrotal skin has more hair on it, and it was causing some pain. Now I’ve been alleviating that problem by stretching more skin toward the top of the shaft. I’m doing that because I want a little more skin to cover up the head of my penis. There’s a little bit that’s exposed since what I did in college. But I want a permanently covered glans. As I said earlier, I’m trying to regain more sensitivity sexually.”

“Has that worked so far?” I ask.

“Yes. With masturbation it’s now easier to be pleased. So I did notice improvement, even within a month or so.”

Next.

“I’m Anthony Losquadro,” says a well-built Italian-American with a thick Brooklyn accent, promptly reaching across the room to shake my hand and pass me both a business card for his site, [intaction.org](http://intaction.org), and a pamphlet with a cover that reads, “Intact Babies Are Happier Healthier Wholesome & Natural.”

“I do a lot of things, but I’m here mainly as an intactivist, or an activist who advocates for people to keep their children intact,” says Anthony. “I’m forty-seven. I’ve been involved for three years. I’ve been to the Berkeley symposium three years ago, the Helsinki symposium, New Orleans, Boston... I run a non-profit and we do what we can to raise awareness on the issue. Baby shows, pregnancy expos.”

They go on like this, eight men with eight different stories and reasons for being here. About half are gay or bisexual; a few are straight. There’s Kevin, twenty-nine, better known as [the Barefoot Intactivist](#), who believes his sexual problems stem from a botched circumcision. There’s Tim, who wanted to start restoring a couple of years ago but had a boyfriend who was against it; Dave, a sixty-year-old, who recently ordered a Tugger online but has used it only irregularly. Tom, whom I talked with before the others arrived at his apartment, adds that in addition to restoring for the past eighteen months, he has convinced several friends not to circumcise their babies.

A good-looking, boy-next-door type, wearing a business suit with his tie removed, stands up to speak.

“My name is Adam,” he says. “I was fifteen when I first heard Howard Stern screaming on the radio that circumcision is mutilation. For some reason it just really hit home with me. I was deeply affected by it, very angry that it existed. Here I am walking around with a scar on my penis, growing up in this world where you’d think that bodily rights are the first thing that come with being alive.

“I started restoring in high school, using T-tape,” Adam goes on. “I bought a DTR two years ago.”

At this point, Daniel pulls his DTR out to show the group. It looks like some kind of S & M pain-inducing mechanism, with a conical shape, plastic head, and some tubes sticking out of it.

“I have about another year to go before I’m finished,” Adam says. “Right now, when I’m flaccid, the skin can probably halfway cover the glans. The most annoying thing about restoring is it’s like somebody is pinching your skin all day long. You’re constantly aware of it.”

It now dawns on me that many of these men may right now have these complex devices on underneath their pants, attached to their penises. Bizarre. Painful. Well, relatively, compared to the act of circumcision, I presume.

*O’Neill displays his restoring equipment, including: silicone adhesive, adhesive remover, a Dual-tension Restorer adapted with a balloon to induce tension through inflation, and “Manhoods”—socks to wear over the penis when not actively restoring (Photos by Emon Hassan)*

“I only tell girlfriends who are girlfriends for a long time,” says Adam. “Random hookups, I never tell. I just pull the gripper piece on and off my penis.”

After a continuous round of questioning, Daniel points out that it’s time for me to go, so that the members can interact freely, without a member of the press present. I have no idea if that half of the meeting includes displaying restoration progress for the group, or just continuing discussion as it was while I was there.

But my overall takeaway from NORM is that these guys are pretty darn normal.

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When I emerged from the NORM meeting, I immediately called my dad to ask him about my bris, an event that I knew took place nearly three decades ago with some fanfare, but one that we’ve never properly discussed. All my dad muttered was, “Traumatic. Traumatic. It was completely traumatic. Some guy just picks up your son and…” He couldn’t finish the sentence but I imagine my eight-day-old self being clamped and sliced by some Jewish Gordon Ramsey.

The writer Joel Stein, who has been a career and life mentor to me for more than three years, penned a TIME Magazine column in 2009 about whether or not to [circumcise his forthcoming son](#). “All I knew was that this is clearly not a decision I should be making for another human being,” wrote Stein. “What school he attends, what he eats, which bouncy seat he should bounce in—sure. Whether to alter your genitals for aesthetic reasons is a question meant for your mid-twenties at Burning Man.”

Stein's wife, however, felt differently, primarily for aesthetic reasons. He said, "My casual conversations with a range of people show a widespread aesthetic preference for circumcised penises over those that are au natural."

Hoodies just aren't ever fashionable it seems!

Stein continued: "I started asking every medical professional, woman and gay man what kind of penis they preferred, which, to my shock, got me a lot of dinner invitations. Though there seemed to be a slight aesthetic preference for not wearing a hat and a slight functional preference for keeping one on, no one had a really good argument for giving your baby plastic surgery. A pediatrician told me the sole reason he circumcised his son was so that the kid looked like him. If my son looks at my penis and the biggest difference he notices is foreskin, I have far more serious problems. Plus, if I wanted my son to look like me, I wouldn't have worked so hard to marry someone better-looking than I am."

I asked Stein—who ultimately consented to having his son circumcised—how he feels about the growing intactivist movement. "I think it's a smart movement," Stein told me. "I would have been happier not circumcising my son if we lived in a demographic that also didn't circumcise. It does seem barbaric and probably cuts down on pleasure. But those STD studies are pretty convincing and that ultimately put me over the edge."

"A lot more women and gay guys in our demo don't dig the uncut," he continued. "My son needs as many advantages as he can get if he's anything like me. So, no. No change in thoughts. I will say that the surgery seemed to cause less pain than I would have imagined. I think lots of things are painful that first week. Like crapping."

The one thing I have concluded for certain is that, whether beneficial or not, the circumcision process is unnatural, peculiar, and most certainly a painful intrusion—and one that is performed largely on newborns who have not requested any such procedure

But should I ever be put in Stein's situation, I'll have to seriously consider what I should do. I'm no card-carrying intactivist and I don't think I'll be restoring any time soon, because, knock on wood, my sexual experiences have been pleasure-full enough. But just because I won't be strapping on a DTR, doesn't mean I won't wonder—or even empathize, in some weird way. It's now like I'll always have a severe case of FOMO (Fear Of Missing Out), a term my friend Miko uses when she can't make it to two events that are happening simultaneously, about what my life would have been like if I hadn't been snipped.

*[Emon Hassan](#) is a photographer and filmmaker based in NYC. He is a contributor to *The New York Times* and *The Atlantic*, and his work has appeared on *BBC*, *Einestages*, *The Washington Post* and *PBS*. You can follow him on [Twitter](#), [Facebook](#) & [Google+](#).*

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