

Intimacy and HIV/Aids

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Abstract

This paper addresses intimacy in relationships where HIV/AIDS exists. The authors explore what strengthens and strains relationships and review insights on promoting communication about intimacy. Therapist discomfort and attitudes that prevent effective therapeutic intervention are addressed to allow for the co-existence of HIV/AIDS and intimacy.

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Dealing with Interaction and Intimacy

Professionals dealing with persons with HIV/AIDS (PWA's) lack knowledge and skill in broaching the topic of intimacy as it is "intrusive" and complex.¹ Even in healthy relationships, sexuality and intimacy are considered multi-dimensional and dynamic and thus difficult to probe.² Discussions on sexuality and intimacy should interrogate whom one has sex with, in what ways, why, under what circumstances and with what outcomes. Further, a culture of "pluralism with multiple perspectives" (McDowell et al³ p.180) needs to be cultivated to generate "thick" conclusions and unique outcomes.⁴

Complicating communication about sex are misconceptions about the contagiousness and management of HIV/AIDS resulting in psychological distress.⁵ Knowledge that partners are turning to sex workers or that there is forced sex to infect others, widens the gap between partners.

What Strengthens/Strains Couple Relationships?

Factors that strengthen intimacy in couple relationships include: honesty, sensitivity, taking responsibility for sexual gratification, communicating needs, identifying and negotiating new ways of achieving intimacy and growing through adversity.¹⁶ Strong relationships are underscored by openness. Open communication leads to taking sexual responsibility that can prevent infection and re-infection and negotiating creative ways of re-kindling intimacy. Closeness and intimacy may be achieved through re-discovering nature as nurturer and through spirituality. When faced with

trauma, it is common to question values, beliefs and spiritual bases to find meaning to life.⁷ Answers may be found in wilderness trails to re-discover and re-connect with what is/was important.⁸ Hence, growth may result from "adversity" and trauma.

Factors that strain couple relationships include: suspicion, fear, making difficult reproductive decisions, guilt, impotence and partners who refuse to use condoms. Pessimism, fear, and guilt have a vice grip control preventing positive living or enjoying fulfilling relationships. When sex is seen as producing the problem of HIV/AIDS in the first place, it is difficult for the couple to resume intimate contact. Reproductive decision-making is complicated when intimacy issues are not addressed. In African communities, bearing a child is seen as an essential part of being a woman and achieving success. Hence women who are infected and who decide against having children may be viewed as unsuccessful, unfulfilled and incomplete.⁹

Unequal power in relationships prevents the negotiation of safe sexual practices to reduce the impact of HIV infection and re-infection.¹⁰ Inequality results from social conditioning of males carrying a "macho" image, of having numerous sexual exploits and being unconcerned about consequences of their behaviour.¹¹ Sexual risk is taken even when knowledge of HIV exists, needing macrosystemic interventions to change notions of dominance in sexual relationships. Gender inequality in relationships is no longer just "costly but fatal" especially where HIV/AIDS exists.² Females must re-claim locus of

control in the sexual encounter and insist on safe sex.¹⁰ Unequal power in sexual relationships also finds expression in revenge infecting to "cure" oneself of the virus. The misconception is that virgins/children have good immunity against sexually transmitted diseases because of a dry vaginal tract which allows an infusion of "purifying blood" from the encounter.¹² Maintaining neutrality when moral conduct is thus breached is difficult especially when burdened by limited resources, skills and knowledge.¹³

Sexual Dysfunction and HIV/AIDS

Sexual dysfunctions/disorders frequently characterize relationships with HIV/AIDS. These include: inhibited sexual desire, sexual aversion disorder, sexual arousal disorder, male erectile disorder, male/female orgasmic disorder, sexual pain disorder, premature ejaculation and vaginismus.¹⁴

The challenge is to keep abreast of an ever-evolving pool of knowledge and remain unbalanced when intruding into the private space of intimacy. The counselor often faces the additional challenge of societal pressure not to intervene e.g. in a depressed economy that prioritizes basic needs. Under these circumstances sexual health exploration is considered socially and politically irrelevant. How does the counselor give credence to intimacy issues in the absence of basic infrastructural support? Possessing skills to intervene meaningfully goes a long way in addressing this concern.

Skills, Processes and Techniques

Counselors should explore the "p's" of sexuality. These are: practices, partners,

pleasures, pressure, pain, procreation and power.² Power underscores every sexual encounter and was discussed earlier under what strengthens/strains relationships. The interview must also be deliberately planned and special techniques used as discussed hereunder.^{15,16}

Opening the Interview and Goal Setting: Clients should be made aware of why they are interviewed especially the one who did not initiate contact. The origin and development of the disorder and current medication must be understood early as it impacts on sexual (dys)functioning.

Establishing rapport: Clients must feel understood and assured of not being judged. Jargon should be avoided and euphemisms clarified. Rapport tends to increase when people feel in control, so it is helpful to assure clients that they do not have to answer every question and that they can stop the interview if uncomfortable.

Identification of problems: It is helpful to identify problems that are resolvable to generate hope into what appears a desperate and embarrassing situation. Clients should be discouraged from offering justifications; rather they need to provide factual information. It is also useful not to settle for the first sexual problem mentioned as initial awkwardness renders clients garrulous or monosyllabic, giving a false impression of the range and magnitude of the problem.

Background information: It is useful to proceed chronologically e.g. from the present backward or from the past forward. People generally provide more complete information if they are able to place it in the context of other important life events. A map with a time line outlining toxic issues and nodal events may add further clarity.

Completing the interview: It is important to establish what will happen without treatment and “why now?” to provide direction and impetus towards change. Leaving the door open for further elaboration is necessary as clients are rarely able to tell the whole story in a single interview.

The interview may be easier to conduct if specific interviewing techniques are employed.¹⁶ These include the *sportscaster technique* to ask the person to describe an event as a sportscaster with the event happening right now. The time sequence avoids speculation, hypothesizing and

rationalizing about the problem. The time line discussed earlier is a similar concept. Using the *sexual fantasy letter*, the PWA is invited to write a letter to a magazine describing “unusual/best sexual experiences” to elicit information to identify sexual problems and their solutions. The technique of *future projection* as discussed in “completing the interview” again helps to question the future, with and without treatment. The authors note that this is in accord with hypothetical questioning used in Milan Family to project the future, set goals and deal with impasses in the face of hopelessness.

Both HIV and intimacy are topics shrouded in secrecy and silence. By employing the above processes and techniques, counselors normalize HIV and intimacy and nurture their co-existence. A *normative support group environment* also helps move beyond illness and stigma to receive compassionate care.^{5,13,17,18} Groups provide for “weakened or absent social support”.¹⁹ In addition they facilitate the development of alliances, representing PWA's to the outside world, making possible collective responses and generating hope while institutionalizing problems.¹³ Group interaction encourages the exploration of what matters most such as reproductive options, future planning, seeking forgiveness and re-connecting with spirituality.¹ Changes could then be reinforced by the group.¹³

Conclusions and Recommendations

The conspiracy of silence and shame surrounding both HIV and intimacy render the co-existence of both a serious challenge and carries hidden costs, mostly in human “wreckage”.²¹ Proactive empowerment and life-long learning at multi-systemic levels is vital. This may be accomplished through the employment of narrative theatre to promote community education²² allowing PWA's who have endured histories of stigma to tell their stories without prior interpretation and receive respect and community support.¹⁹ In a similar vein, “edutainment” to educate the masses is suggested, noting that HIV/AIDS has been the target of much attention, and therefore has to be relayed differently but culturally appropriately to educate and entertain for mass benefit.¹⁰ Peer education is a valuable means of participatory practice that may

promote the negotiation of safer sexual practices where perceived power differences dominate in the relationship.^{19,20} Supporting peer education with role plays would facilitate sexual decision making to distinguish gaps between cognitive knowledge and behavioural outcomes. In addition, macrosystemic approaches that change beliefs about male domination and myths around revenge infection require national co-ordination such as affirming the female through “women's day” celebrations.

Intimacy and sexuality are integral to the human experience. However, intimacy is elusive when accompanied by hopelessness and negativity. Re-connecting with nature and spirit has been suggested to re-experience hope and positivity. The metaphors of nature could be likened to metaphors of life to face adversity with hope^{8,23} and religion/spirituality could affirm tired spirits to promote forgiving, all of which are essential to re-kindling intimacy in relationships.⁷

Intimacy and HIV/AIDS need to coexist as we move from shame to empowerment of the individual, couple, counselor and the community. ♡

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