
HIV-infected Women's Perspectives on the Use of the Internet for Social Support: A Potential Role for Online Group-based Interventions

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While the development and implementation of HIV-related online interventions has expanded, few have been tailored for women or have leveraged Web 2.0's capabilities to provide social support. We conducted semi-structured interviews with 27 women with HIV at an urban community health center to understand their perspectives on the potential role of the Internet and the use of an online group format to provide social support. Data were analyzed using the constant comparative method. We identified six themes: a need for groups and increased sense of connectedness, convenience and accessibility, trust as a precondition for participating, online groups as a potential facilitator or barrier to expression, limited digital access and literacy, and privacy concerns. Overall, women were highly supportive of online group-based interventions but acknowledged the need for increased digital access and Internet navigation training. Hybrid (in-person and online) interventions may be most useful for women with HIV.

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Group-based health interventions are a common approach to leverage social support and increase motivation for positive behavior change (Campbell et al., 2000). Such interventions can directly buffer potentially distressing effects of an HIV diagnosis or a related medical condition (e.g., substance use disorder). HIV-related group interventions have been associated with decreased shame, HIV-related stigma, and risk behaviors, and increased perceived social support (Hyde, Appleby, Weiss, Bailey, & Morgan, 2005; Lennon-Dearing, 2008). Group-based interventions may be especially useful for

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women with HIV, as studies have demonstrated that they often lack positive social support (Hosek, Brothers, & Lemos, 2012; Squires et al., 2011; Walsh, Horvath, Fisher, & Courtenay-Quirk, 2012), and many do not seek support within their existing social networks (Wingood et al., 2004). Providing women greater access to group-based interventions to address these important gaps may improve overall well-being and adjustment to living with HIV.

Technology-delivered interventions have proliferated in the past decade, with some showing positive effects on the health and well-being of people with HIV (Pellowski & Kalichman, 2012). A variety of different devices (e.g., computer, mobile, tablet) now are available to deliver health interventions and most have the ability to access the Internet. As such, online interventions may be easily disseminated to people with HIV, including women. Research has found that some women with HIV go online seeking support, but they often struggle to find such support (Walsh et al., 2012). To complicate matters, women with HIV are disproportionately African American or Latina and overwhelmingly socioeconomically disadvantaged, factors that are associated with lower rates of Internet use (Zickuhr & Smith, 2012). These challenges may, in part, explain why most HIV-related online interventions have been tailored for men who have sex with men (MSM) or adolescents (Bull, Levine, Black, Schmiege, & Santelli, 2012; Danielson et al., 2013; Hightow-Weidman et al., 2012; Hirshfield et al., 2012; Horvath et al., 2013; Rosser et al., 2010; Young et al., 2013).

Even though peer support is a recommended strategy to improve HIV outcomes (Thompson et al., 2012), relatively few Internet-based HIV interventions leverage peer-to-peer social support that has come to characterize Web 2.0 technology. Online chat room-based interventions that allow participants to exchange information and share experiences have been shown to increase social support (Wantland, Portillo, Holzemer, Slaughter, & McGhee, 2004). Horvath and colleagues (2013) pilot tested a peer-to-peer support intervention to improve antiretroviral therapy adherence outcomes in MSM. To our knowledge, there is only one group-based video-conferencing intervention for women with HIV (Marhefka et al., 2013). Taken together, existing research shows great promise for the use of online

group-based interventions to improve HIV outcomes for women, but more information is needed to optimize reach and potential impact.

To address this gap in the literature, we interviewed women with HIV to gain a greater understanding of their perspectives on the potential role of the Internet to address their health needs. In particular, we were interested in gathering more information about what women perceived to be opportunities and challenges to implementing an online group-based intervention to increase social support. Our findings will help inform development of interventions that use the Internet, and possibly other forms of technologies, to improve the health and well-being of women with HIV.

Methods

Setting

Our study was conducted at a community-based clinic in the Bronx, NY, which provides general and HIV primary care. The clinic mostly serves surrounding communities that are predominantly African American/Black and Latino and have high rates of poverty and chronic diseases, including HIV infection (New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene, 2010).

Participants

We recruited patients from February to June 2013 who were: (a) female, (b) at least 18 years of age, (c) HIV infected, and (d) English proficient. We approached patients in the clinic waiting room and contacted patients who had previously expressed interest in participating in ongoing research studies. Participants provided written informed consent and were reimbursed 20 USD and travel expenses for their time (approximately 4.50 USD). The Albert Einstein College of Medicine Institutional Review Board approved the study.

Data Collection

A trained female research assistant conducted semi-structured individual interviews lasting 45 to

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