



A Sexual Empowerment group for Women living with HIV

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Positive East Positive East is London's largest HIV Charity, providing both HIV support and prevention services to over 4,000 people per year. Re:Assure is a dedicated service for refugee, asylum-seeking or migrant women who are living with HIV and who have experienced traumatic events.



Introduction

Women living with HIV (WLHIV) frequently report relationship difficulties including sexual health concerns, cultural issues, the impact of abuse & trauma and problems relating to disclosure.

High levels of HIV-related stigma are also commonly reported within this group, with associated levels of low self-esteem. In turn, low self-esteem affects mood, with mood disorders being reported at a significantly higher rate among WLHIV, compared with men living with HIV: 70% of women vs. 30% of men (Positively UK, 2014).

In a relationship context issues of stigma, low self-esteem, depression and anxiety can be intensified and contribute to feelings of disempowerment (Jelliman, 2013). This group was specifically set up to target these problematic issues.

This sexual empowerment group aimed to

- Improve women's knowledge of issues relating to sex and relationships
- Provide an unmet need for WLHIV to discuss their sexual activity and sexual concerns in a safe, inclusive environment
- Encourage women to address concerns about their current relationships, sexual health, abuse & well-being
- Improve women's feelings of sexual wellbeing and increase levels of self-esteem & self-confidence
- Increase resilience and mood (decrease depression and anxiety levels)
- Empower women to move forward in the knowledge that they can confidently manage healthy relationships

Results

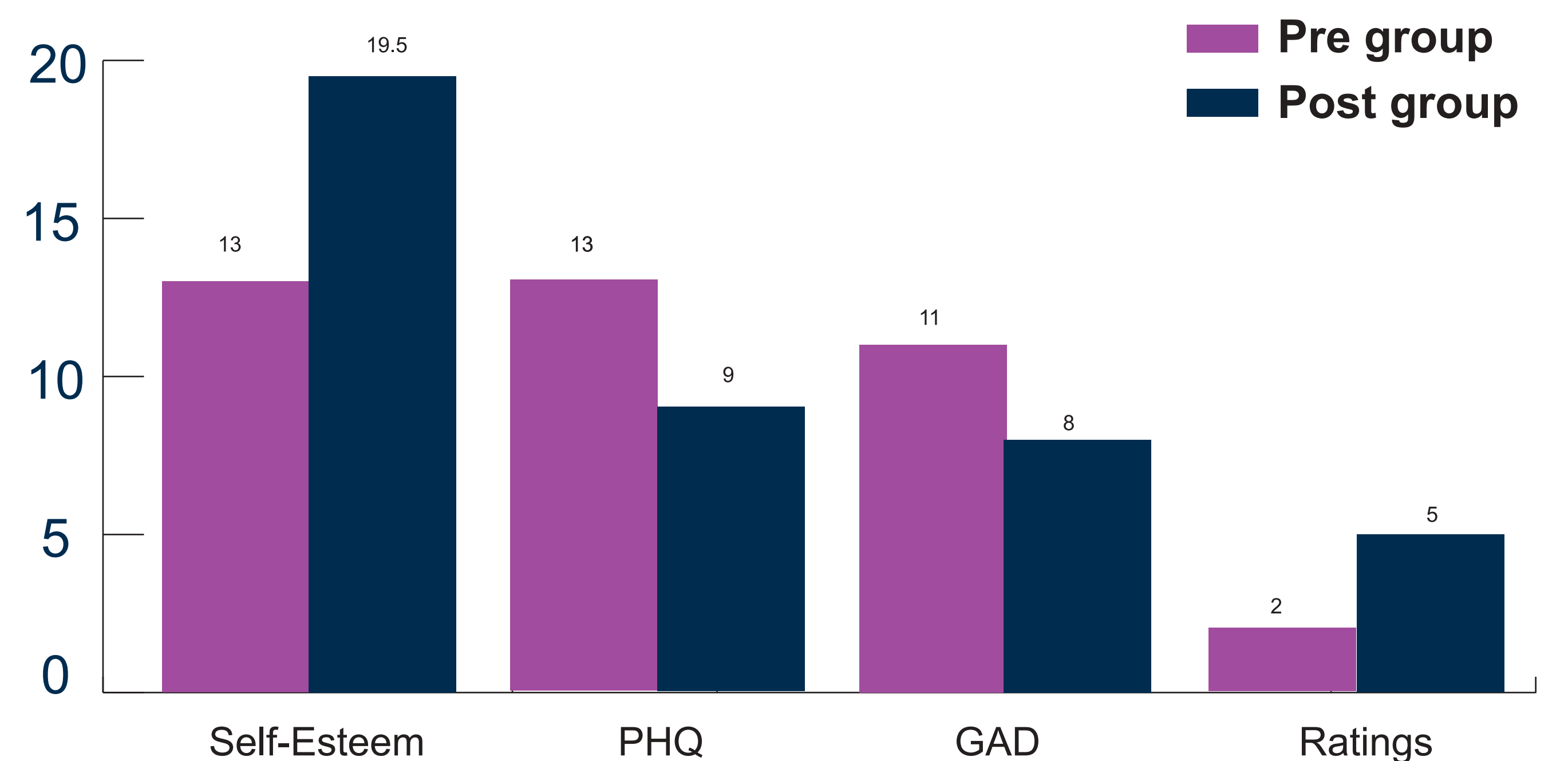
Self Esteem: Levels increased by a 6.5 average bringing women from a low (below 15) to a normal score (measured by the Rosenberg Self - esteem Scale)

Depression: Levels decreased by a 4-point average bringing women from a 13 to a 9-point score (measured by the PHQ-9)

Anxiety: Levels decreased by a 3-point average bringing women from a 11 to an 8-point score (measured by the GAD-7)

Self-rating likert scales measured knowledge, coping, sexual wellbeing and self confidence levels (1-5)

Qualitative interviews corroborated these findings.



"I now feel confident to ask for what I want – both in bed and in relationships"

"I loved learning about what is accepted/not accepted within relationships in different cultures"

"The group helped me to feel normal again"

"It was great to be able to raise anxieties about our sexual health in a safe place"

Discussion & Conclusion

Increased knowledge: Women increased their knowledge regarding sexual health & HIV, sexual pleasure, sexual rights & sexual wellbeing and their ability to speak about these issues.

Reduced distress: This group had positive results which showed increased self-esteem levels and lower depression and anxiety scores. Women also learned that mood, stress and stigma may underpin many of their self-esteem issues in a relationship context.

Increased skills: Participants reported an increase in the use of strategies for: managing abusive behaviour within relationships, disclosing their status, requesting their needs and vocalising concerns.

Growing need: This group fills a gap in services that address relationship issues amongst WLHIV, particularly given that many relationship concerns were raised, yet never addressed, during previous care episodes.

References

- Jelliman, P. (2013) Identifying needs of women living with HIV. Nursing Times; 109: 22, 16-20
- Positively UK (2015) Women Know Best: What are the best practices in effective high-quality HIV support for women in the UK. London: Positively UK. Available from http://positivelyuk.org/wpcontent/uploads/2015/09/Women-Know-Best-Report_Final-Aug-15.pdf

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