

“I told him...and he kissed me straight away”

Developing a model of dating for young adult women living with HIV

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Background

Globally, just over half of people living with HIV are women (UNAIDS, 2021). However, women express feeling underrepresented in HIV services and research, with more focus needed on intersectionality (Sophia Forum & Terrence Higgins Trust, 2018).

Women have identified the need for more support regarding intimacy and relationships when living with HIV, because many of them believe it has had a negative impact on their lives (Sophia Forum & Terrence Higgins Trust, 2018). This is often due to anticipated stigma (anticipating discrimination), negatively impacting women’s psychological wellbeing and support systems (Huntingdon et al, 2020; Stigma Survey, 2015).

This research aimed to develop an inclusive framework to understand women’s struggles and successes regarding dating and living with HIV.

Methods

Ten women living with HIV aged 18-50 years old were recruited from a London-based HIV outpatient clinic. Participants completed a semi-structured interview and data was analysed using grounded theory.

Women identified as cisgender and heterosexual. Women varied in age (mean 38.5 years old) ethnicity (eight Black African/Caribbean/British, two White European), religion (seven Christian, one Muslim, one Buddhist, one unsure) and time since diagnosis (mean 15.3 years). Three women were single, six were in a relationship and one did not state their relationship-status.

Results

Barriers to dating included: fear of status-sharing, anticipated hostility, past experiences of abuse, and self-stigmatisation.

“you put yourself down...I went into a bubble...I was like I’m not doing this dating life again” (P4)

“my ex-partner ended up manipulating me...threatening me to say he is going to tell people...I ended up saying I don’t want men” (P5)

Women described overcoming barriers through a ‘journey’ from self-stigmatisation to acceptance of HIV, facilitated by social-support and U=U. Women also described reconnecting with their values and identity.

“...when I started learning...this is not a death sentence...life is normal...everything changed for me” (P1)

“...I take meds every day...the science is being improved so much...there is hope” (P9)

“people should educate themselves, rather than me feeling horrible about their reactions” (P7)

Status-sharing with friends also helped women to start dating and discuss HIV in relationships.

“they’re [friends] super supportive...especially if I’m dating...I have that back-up person who’s like ‘come on, just try, he might be the one’...” (P4)

Discussion

Dating was described as both fulfilling, and fear provoking. Support should address past experiences of intimacy and abuse that could compromise feelings of trust and safety in new relationships. Women should also be supported to share their status with their support network and connect with valued aspects of their identity. Additionally, women felt that more representation of HIV and U=U was needed across the media.

References

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