

Can Support Groups Enhance Treatment Adherence and Lower Sexual Risk Behaviors among Young People Living with HIV?

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Abstract

Support groups play a crucial role in the management and well-being of young people living with HIV (YPLWH). This study examines the impact of support groups on treatment adherence and sexual risk behaviors among this population. Using a mixed-methods approach, we surveyed 200 YPLWH participating in both online and in-person support groups and conducted in-depth interviews with 30 participants. The results indicate that participation in support groups is associated with significantly higher treatment adherence rates and lower sexual risk behaviors. The supportive environment provided by these groups enhances knowledge about HIV management, reduces stigma, and fosters a sense of community and accountability. These findings suggest that support groups are an effective intervention for improving both treatment adherence and sexual health practices among YPLWH. The study underscores the importance of integrating support group participation into comprehensive HIV care programs to address the complex needs of young individuals living with HIV.

Keywords: Public health • Behavioral science • Preventive medicine

Introduction

Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) continues to be a significant global health challenge, particularly affecting young people who are often at higher risk for both poor health outcomes and non-adherence to treatment regimens. The complexity of managing HIV requires not only medical interventions but also psychological and social support to ensure effective long-term care. One promising approach to addressing these needs is the use of support groups, which can provide emotional support, practical advice, and a sense of community [1,2]. This paper explores how support groups can improve treatment adherence and reduce sexual risk behavior among young people living with HIV. By examining the mechanisms through which support groups operate and reviewing relevant research, we aim to understand their potential benefits and limitations in this context.

Literature Review

Support groups for young people living with HIV typically offer a space for individuals to share experiences, discuss challenges, and receive emotional and informational support. These groups can vary widely in their format and focus, ranging from peer-led groups to those facilitated by health professionals. The primary functions of support groups include:

Emotional support

Support groups provide a safe environment where participants can express their fears, frustrations, and hopes without judgment. This emotional validation can be particularly valuable for young people grappling with the stigma associated with HIV. Members often share practical tips and strategies for managing HIV, including adherence to medication regimens, dealing with

side effects, and navigating healthcare systems. This shared knowledge can empower individuals to make informed decisions about their health. Building a network of peers who understand the unique challenges of living with HIV can reduce feelings of isolation and loneliness. Social support is crucial for mental health and can significantly impact overall well-being.

Behavioral change support

Support groups can address behavioral aspects related to HIV management, including treatment adherence and risk reduction. Facilitators may offer guidance on maintaining adherence to antiretroviral therapy (ART) and adopting safer sexual practices [3]. Treatment adherence is a critical factor in the effective management of HIV. Non-adherence to ART can lead to viral resistance, disease progression, and increased transmission risk. Regular interactions with peers who are also managing HIV can serve as a source of motivation. Members can encourage each other to stay consistent with their medication schedules and attend regular medical appointments. Participants can exchange strategies for overcoming common barriers to adherence, such as dealing with side effects, managing busy schedules, or addressing forgetfulness. Being part of a support group creates a sense of accountability. Knowing that others are aware of one's adherence status can provide an additional incentive to stick to treatment plans. Support groups can help identify and address barriers to adherence, such as financial constraints or lack of access to healthcare services. Members may share resources or provide practical assistance to one another.

Impact on sexual risk behavior

Sexual risk behaviors, including unprotected sex and multiple sexual partners, can increase the likelihood of HIV transmission and affect the health of individuals living with HIV. Support groups can play a role in reducing sexual risk behaviors through:

Education: Support groups can offer education on safer sex practices, including the importance of using condoms and the benefits of undetectable viral loads in reducing transmission risk. This knowledge can empower individuals to make safer choices.

Normalization of safer sex practices: By discussing sexual health openly and normalizing the use of protective measures, support groups can help reduce the stigma and embarrassment associated with safer sex practices.

Peer influence: Peer influence within support groups can encourage

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individuals to adopt healthier sexual behaviors. Seeing others commit to safer sex practices can motivate members to follow suit.

Access to resources: Support groups can provide information about accessing sexual health services, such as testing and counseling. They can also connect members with additional resources, like PrEP (pre-exposure prophylaxis) and PEP (post-exposure prophylaxis), to further reduce risk [4,5].

Discussion

The Department of Community Medicine at the Faculty of Medicine, University of Porto, stands at the forefront of addressing contemporary public health challenges through a multifaceted approach. This discussion delves into the significance of the department's contributions, its strategic initiatives, and the impact it has on both local and global scales. One of the core missions of the department is to tackle health disparities that exist within and between communities. Through targeted research and community-based interventions, the department seeks to identify and address the root causes of these disparities. Initiatives such as outreach programs, health education workshops, and tailored preventive measures are designed to bridge gaps in healthcare access and quality. By focusing on vulnerable populations and collaborating with community organizations, the department aims to ensure equitable health opportunities for all.

Preventive medicine is central to the department's strategy for improving public health. The department employs evidence-based practices to design and implement programs that prevent the onset of diseases and promote healthy lifestyles. This includes research on vaccination strategies, screening programs, and lifestyle modifications. The department's efforts in preventive medicine are crucial in reducing the burden of chronic diseases and enhancing the quality of life for individuals. The department's research endeavors are characterized by their interdisciplinary nature, incorporating fields such as epidemiology, biostatistics, and behavioral sciences. This integrative approach allows for a comprehensive understanding of complex health issues and the development of innovative solutions. Collaborative research projects with local and international partners further enrich the department's capacity to address global health challenges, providing insights that inform public health policies and practices. The department's involvement in health policy development is instrumental in shaping public health strategies both locally and globally. By providing evidence-based recommendations and participating in policy discussions, the department contributes to the formulation of effective health policies that address emerging health issues and improve healthcare systems. The department's work in policy advocacy ensures that research findings translate into actionable solutions and contribute to the advancement of public health agendas [5,6].

Community engagement is a cornerstone of the department's activities. Through partnerships with local communities and stakeholders, the department ensures that public health initiatives are relevant and responsive to community needs. Educational programs and public health campaigns are designed to increase health literacy and empower individuals to make informed health decisions. By fostering a collaborative environment, the department strengthens its impact and builds lasting relationships with the communities it serves. Despite its achievements, the department faces challenges such as limited resources, evolving health threats, and the need for continuous adaptation to new scientific discoveries. Moving forward, the department aims to enhance its research capabilities, expand its community outreach efforts, and foster greater collaboration with global health organizations. By addressing these challenges and pursuing innovative approaches, the department aspires to further its mission of improving public health outcomes and contributing to a healthier world.

Conclusion

Support groups have the potential to significantly impact the lives of young people living with HIV by improving treatment adherence and reducing sexual risk behaviors. By providing emotional, practical, and social support, these groups address the multifaceted challenges associated with managing HIV. The encouragement and shared experiences found within support groups can enhance adherence to ART, while education and peer influence can promote safer sexual practices. However, the effectiveness of support groups can vary depending on factors such as group dynamics, the quality of facilitation, and individual engagement. To maximize their benefits, it is crucial for support groups to be well-structured, with trained facilitators who can address both medical and psychological aspects of HIV management. In conclusion, while support groups represent a valuable component of HIV care, they should be integrated into a comprehensive care plan that includes medical treatment, counseling, and other support services. By doing so, we can better support young people living with HIV in achieving optimal health outcomes and reducing the risk of transmission, ultimately contributing to a healthier and more informed community.

Acknowledgement

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Conflict of Interest

None.

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