

## **Navigating Quality of Life: effects of a peer navigation program for PLHIV in Australia**

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**Background:** We explored the effects of a peer navigation program on the Quality of Life (QoL) of people living with HIV (PLHIV) in Victoria. The program employed peers living with HIV to guide people who were newly diagnosed or experiencing challenges related to health, wellbeing and managing life with HIV.

**Methods:** Interviews with 27 clients were conducted between July and October 2020, transcribed and thematically analysed.

**Results:** Participants were nineteen men, seven women and one person who was non-binary. Of the men, twelve were gay, four were heterosexual and three were bi+. Nineteen participants were born overseas, of whom nine were born in East or Southeast Asia, five in Europe and New Zealand, three in South America and two in Southern Africa.

Interviews showed how peer navigation relieved stigma, loneliness and concerns related to health and life goals, particularly for the newly diagnosed. The peer relationship offered participants a model which helped transform stigmatising beliefs about HIV and their own self-image. Navigators also shared insights, empathy, reassurance, and introduced participants to community members, programs and social services.

The impact of an HIV diagnosis on life goals was more enduring for participants who experienced stigma and discrimination migrating to Victoria or in their countries and families of origin. Socially isolated heterosexual men, women and recent migrants benefitted greatly from emotional support and connection to PLHIV community.

Participants also accessed the program over the phone or online during COVID-19 restrictions. They received welfare checks and help with access to medicine and income, but experienced challenges maintaining employment, social support and other activities which supported QoL.

**Conclusion:** Our study found consistent qualitative evidence to suggest that peer navigation can improve contemporary factors related to QoL for PLHIV. These findings guide the aims, scope and evaluation of similar programs, particularly those assessing themes or validated measures of QoL.

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