

EXAMINING HIV ANXIETY IN GAY MEN AS AN EMBODIED RESPONSE TO THE AIDS CRISIS

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Background:

Discussions of “HIV anxiety” abound in recent behavioural studies examining gay men’s use of pre-exposure prophylaxis for HIV (PrEP). These studies provide evidence that PrEP can reduce or even eliminate this anxiety. PrEP scholarship usually frames HIV anxiety in broad terms as a response to “stigma”; however, little research has examined HIV anxiety as an embodied phenomenon, particularly for gay men who did not directly participate in gay sexual subcultures during the AIDS crisis. This paper will suggest that HIV anxiety can be understood as an embodied response with its origins in the cultural and historical legacy of the AIDS crisis.

Methods:

In order to examine how gay men understand their embodied experience of HIV anxiety, in-depth qualitative interviews were conducted with 15 gay and other same-sex attracted men born between 1981 and 1996. These interviews explored participants’ relationships to AIDS history, and the impact of PrEP use on participants’ HIV anxiety.

Results:

Many participants understood their HIV anxiety to have its origins in their exposure to cultural and other messaging relating to the AIDS crisis during childhood and adolescence. Participants noted that prior to initiating PrEP, their embodied experiences of HIV anxiety persisted despite receiving HIV stigma-reduction education. For many, PrEP was able to reduce their embodied experience of HIV anxiety in ways that more discursive or “rational” education about HIV stigma was not.

Conclusion:

This study sheds new light on HIV anxiety as an embodied experience among gay and other same-sex attracted men. It relates this anxiety to childhood and adolescent experiences of the cultural and historical impact of the AIDS crisis. Further, by highlighting the embodied experiences of HIV anxiety, these results may also prompt a need to re-think approaches to HIV stigma-reduction education to engage directly with embodied experience.

Disclosure of Interest Statement:

The author has no interests to disclose.