

PEER NAVIGATION WITH WOMEN AND HETEROSEXUALLY-IDENTIFYING MEN; OVERCOMING ISOLATION AND BUILDING COMMUNITY.

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Background/Purpose:

Women and heterosexually-identifying men living with HIV (WHIM) are at risk of intense isolation. Stigma and concealment of HIV leaves individuals without the protective advantages of community, arguably more available within sexually diverse communities. Trained female and heterosexual male peer navigators, working together, can play essential roles in facilitating social connection, normalising HIV, reducing isolation, building community, and reinforcing engagement with care.

Approach:

Living Positive Victoria, by employing female and heterosexual male peers, substantially increases engagement with heterosexual communities. Peers who role-model dignity, self-respect and openness can inspire and offset shame and internal stigma in others. Peer navigators receive supervision and training, are client-centred and employ interpersonal skills to earn trust and respect. They respond to a diverse client group, support HIV health literacy and provide guidance through health systems. They lead carefully designed social and health promotional events to allow peers to meet, share and learn together. Community is created and strengthened. Evaluation is embedded.

Outcomes/Impact:

Over 300 WHIM entered the Peer Navigation Program in its first two years. Clients can tailor their own engagement, choosing from individual or group support, information workshops, or social and online events. Clients have opportunities to share their stories and access leadership training. Friendships form and engagement with the body positive is increased. The Peer Navigation Program is evaluated, clients are genuinely consulted for feedback and direction, and interventions are routinely analysed for learning and improvement.

Innovation and Significance:

WHIM have not been the main beneficiaries of the HIV response so far. By successfully deploying female and heterosexual male peer navigators, Living Positive Victoria's Peer Navigation Program is notable for delivering care to traditionally underserved populations. It can provide a model for other organisations and jurisdictions to invest in peer programs tailored to other less visible populations of people living with HIV.

Disclosure of Interest Statement:

Nothing to disclose