A brief, group intervention reduces HIV and STI sexual risk practices among queer women

Research suggests that up to 20% of lesbian, bisexual and queer women have been diagnosed with a sexually transmitted infection (STI) in their lifetime\(^1\),\(^2\),\(^3\),\(^4\), and the use of safer sex practices are low among this population\(^2\),\(^5\). Despite the data to support the need for interventions to reduce risky sexual practices to prevent STI transmission among queer women, there are few Canadian HIV and STI prevention programs specifically tailored to their needs.

**Queer Women’s Conversations**

Queer Women’s Conversations is a group-based psycho-educational HIV and STI prevention intervention for lesbian, bisexual and queer women and other women who have sex with women. The intervention was adapted from *Many Men, Many Voices*, a health promotion program for young gay black men first developed in the United States.

The intervention involved six consecutive sessions (lasting two to three hours) conducted at weekend retreats held in Toronto and Calgary in March and April 2014. Content was delivered using a variety of techniques such as small and large group discussions, role-play, and arts-based methods.

Session topics covered included:

- Sex, bodies, pleasure and safer sex knowledge
- Sexual stigma, sexuality, barriers, and facilitators to safer sex, emotional and mental health
- Power relations, healthy relationships, communication skills, safer sex self-efficacy, and intimacy
- Internalized stigma, self-esteem, self-acceptance, and resilient coping
- Social and health services, community resources and support systems, and strategies for building and connecting to LGBTQ communities.

There were 44 participants in the pilot study of Queer Women’s Conversations. The women were asked to complete a survey before the intervention to determine baseline answers to the survey questions. Participants were asked to complete the survey again immediately after the intervention and again six weeks later. The final survey was completed by 38 of the 44 participants.

Overall, participants reduced their sexual risk practices significantly, immediately post-intervention and six weeks later when compared to baseline data\(^6\).

The research also showed that Queer Women’s Conversations had a significant positive impact on participants’ belief that they could use safer sex methods (self-efficacy), STI knowledge, and sexual stigma immediately after the intervention and six weeks later, compared to baseline data.

Increases in some social support outcomes (reliable alliance and guidance), and in community connectedness were
observed immediately post-intervention compared to baseline data, but these positive impacts were not observed six weeks after the end of the intervention.

The intervention did not impact outcomes such as resilient coping, self-esteem, depression, and social support dimensions such as attachment, social integration, opportunity for nurturance and reassurance of worth.

A possible program model for queer women’s sexual health

The study is one of the first of its kind to demonstrate that a brief HIV and STI prevention program can impact the sexual risk practices of queer women. Although there are a number of promising Canadian approaches to HIV and STI prevention among youth, African, Caribbean and Black communities, Aboriginal communities, and recently, the emergence of Totally Outright in Canada for queer men, Queer Women’s Conversations has the potential to fill a gap in the continuum of HIV and STI prevention services in Canada.

References

Disclaimer

Decisions about particular medical treatments should always be made in consultation with a qualified medical practitioner knowledgeable about HIV- and hepatitis C-related illness and the treatments in question.

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