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Preventing HIV Transmission among Women Living with HIV: Women Involved in Life Learning from Other Women The *WiLLOW* Program

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Overview

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention statistics on the cumulative effects of HIV infection and AIDS through 2003 indicate that women with AIDS made up an increasing part of the epidemic. From 1999 through 2003, the annual number of estimated AIDS diagnoses increased 15 percent among women. Because of a rise in the number of HIV-infected African-American women, the *WiLLOW* program was developed to address the needs of this population. Original research tested the efficacy of a sexual risk-reduction and coping enhancement program for women to enhance coping skills, improve quality of life, increase safer sex and reduce STDs.

Eligibility and Incentives

Women were eligible if they were between 18 and 50 years old, sought medical care for HIV/AIDS at a study recruitment site, were sexually active in the previous six months and provided written informed consent. Participants were transported to and from the sessions and received \$50 for their time to attend each session, for childcare and for completing baseline and follow-up assessments.

Methods

The *WiLLOW* program consisted of four four-hour interactive group sessions of eight to ten participants each implemented over consecutive weeks by a trained female health educator and was co-facilitated by an HIV-positive female peer educator.

Theoretical Foundation

The social learning theory and the theory of gender and power were used as theoretical foundations to develop and implement the program.

Session 1: Gender Pride/Social Support

The joys and challenges of being a woman, goal-setting, recognizing values important to women and developing personalized social support networks were emphasized.

Session 2: Stress Management

Stress was defined and sources of stress identified. Participants discussed coping methods by determining if stress can be changed by either changing one's thinking or behavior. The session incorporates the **RELAX** strategy of managing stress: **R** – Relax: employ relaxation techniques such as listening to soothing audio tapes; **E** – Express Yourself: talk or write in a journal; **L** – Let Others Help: seek and accept social support; **A** – Allow Positive Thoughts: think about uplifting affirmations; **X** – Exercise: exercise by walking or dancing.

Session 3: Sexual Communication and Condom Use Skills

The purpose of this session was to enhance awareness of risk behaviors, foster healthy attitudes toward condom use and discuss changing behavior.

Session 4: Healthy Relationships

Participants are taught to distinguish between healthy and unhealthy relationships, discussed domestic violence, sexual and emotional abuse and the **OPRAH** (Open, Pinch, Roll, After sex, Hold) technique of condom use.

Results

Participants in the intervention reported: 1) fewer episodes of unprotected intercourse; 2) less likelihood of never using condoms; 3) lower incidence of bacterial infections; 4) greater HIV knowledge and condom use self-efficacy; and 4) fewer partner-related barriers to condom use.

Sources: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention presentation at the 2005 National HIV Prevention Conference Atlanta, Ga.

<http://www.cdc.gov/hiv/pubs/facts/women.htm>

