

Stigma, Forgiveness and Depression in HIV+ Women

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Stigma, a stressor in HIV+ adult women, is associated with high levels of maladaptive coping and behavior (Martin, 2006). Stress from HIV-related stigma can result in depression and is associated with poor medical adherence, nondisclosure to sexual partners, and coping difficulties (Vanable, 2006). Forgiveness, a teachable skill, is associated with reducing stress, and increasing self-esteem and self-efficacy (Luskin, 2002).

Based on Lazarus and Folkman's stress and coping deficit model (1984) we hypothesized HIV-related stigma as a stressor would be positively associated with depression whereas forgiveness would be negatively associated with depression.

Data was collected in 2007 from 30 heterosexual HIV+ women from an AIDS service organization in Dallas. Mean sample age was 47(SD=8.4) years, 93% identified as African American and the remainder as European American. The Heartland Forgiveness Scale (Thompson, 2005; $\alpha=.76$), HIV Stigma Scale (Berger et al, 2001; $\alpha=.95$), and Center for Epidemiological Studies Depression Scale (Radloff, 1977; $\alpha=.89$) were administered to participants.

A regression analysis revealed that both stigma ($\beta= .30$, $T=2.2$, $p<.05$) and forgiveness ($\beta= -.59$, $T= -4.4$, $p<.01$) significantly explained 53% of the variance (Adj $R^2= .53$, $F(2,27)=17.80$, $p<.001$) in depression in our sample. Although forgiveness did not significantly moderate the relationship between stigma and depression in our model, this may be due to small sample size and lack of sufficient power.

Our findings suggest forgiveness is associated with less depression while stigma is associated with more depression in HIV+ women. We speculate forgiveness training will not only reduce depression among HIV+ adult women, but will also moderate HIV-related stigma in depression, resulting in less perceived stress and improved quality of life in HIV+ women.

Limitations include small sample, recruitment from only one community-based location, self-reported bias, and using a few variables to explain complex constructs.