

Stress and risk

Poor mental health among men who have sex with men is contributing to increased risk of HIV

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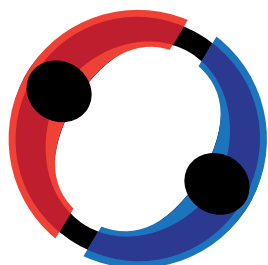
Poor mental health caused by stress can lead men who have sex with men (MSM) to engage in high HIV risk behaviour including having unprotected sex, multiple sexual partners and alcohol or drug abuse.

A new study which aims to reduce the risk of contracting HIV among MSM in South Africa and Namibia has highlighted the stress experienced by MSM arising from stigma, social isolation and hostility. The study found that building healthy coping mechanisms in MSM could help reduce the transmission of HIV by reducing behaviours that put MSM into a high-risk category for contracting HIV.

Minority stress refers to the chronic stress experienced by a stigmatised minority group, including members of the MSM community, who are exposed to hostile and homophobic social environments. In-depth interviews were held with

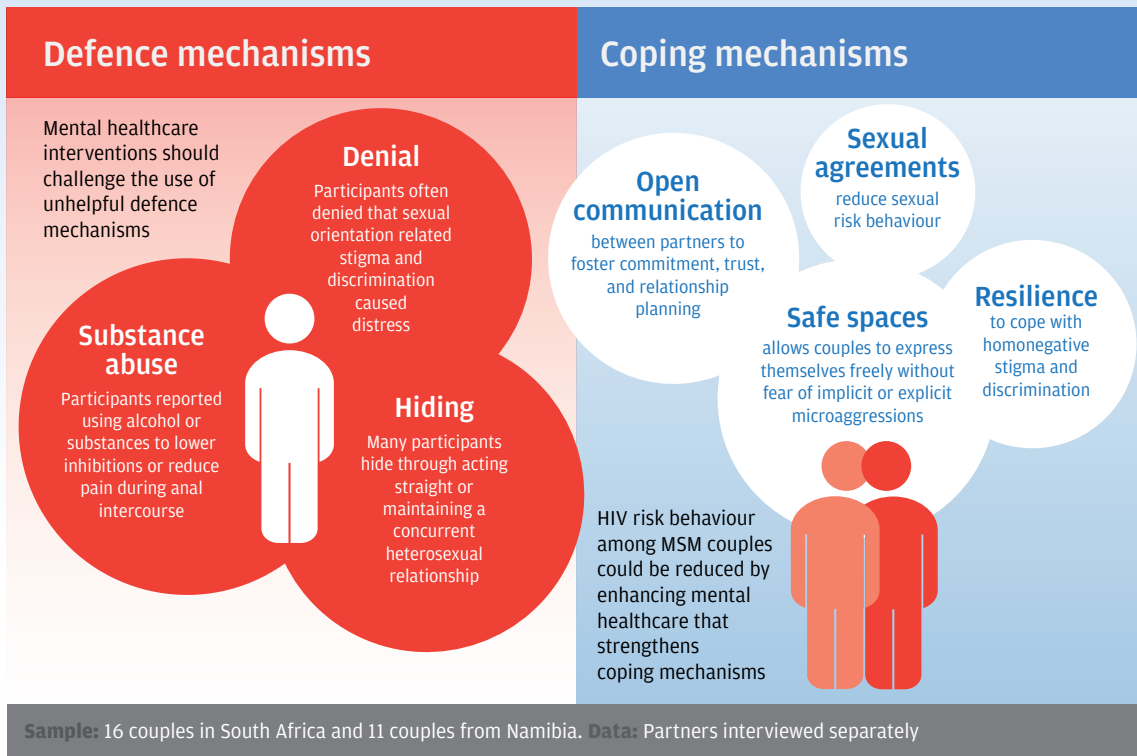
MSM couples to learn more about the coping mechanisms they employed to deal with minority stress. Participants reported similar stressors in both countries, despite the legal protections afforded to MSM in South Africa not existing in Namibia.

MSM often use defence mechanisms to reduce the pressure they feel to conform, such as denial, hiding their sexual orientation and pretending to be straight. Some of the men interviewed are in concurrent heterosexual relationships and some even have their own children. Alcohol and drugs are often used to lessen inhibitions while exploring their



**Together
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Together Tomorrow is a study exploring the HIV prevention needs of men within same-sex relationships in an attempt to better understand behaviours which could place men at increased risk of HIV. The study was led by the HSRC in collaboration with investigators from the University of California, San Francisco and the University of Michigan, in partnership with the Gay and Lesbian Network (South Africa) and Positive Vibes (Namibia). It was funded by UK aid through the EHPSA programme.



Finding safe spaces where couples can express themselves, and their love for one another freely, without fear of discrimination or implicit or explicit micro-aggressions, can support the journey towards better mental health and from there to reduced HIV risk taking behaviour.

sexuality, and to reduce pain or fear of pain during sexual intercourse.

In interviews with 27 MSM couples (11 in Namibia and 16 in South Africa), researchers identified key HIV risks and relationship challenges as well as defence and coping mechanisms employed by the participants. Partners were interviewed concurrently but separately to support the integrity of the findings.

The interviews revealed that MSM couples experience many of the same challenges as opposite-sex couples, including communication difficulties, infidelity and abuse. However, anxiety and the fear of being discriminated against by family, friends and others increases the susceptibility of MSM to mental health issues. As a result, MSM couples tend to rely heavily on their partners for emotional support.

Effective mental health interventions need to address contextual differences in order to be successful. In addition to the regular relationship challenges experienced by MSM couples, their stress is increased by the hostile environment in which they live and love.

Developing appropriate and healthy coping mechanisms is critical for good mental health. Arising from this study, the researchers

recommended four strategies to enhance and support good mental health in MSM. These are:

- 1 Developing open communication between partners to foster commitment, trust and enhance relationship planning, in order to understand where the relationship is heading.
- 2 Concluding a clear sexual agreement which defines acceptable behaviour within the relationship and spells out what behaviours will lead to the ending of the relationship.
- 3 Finding ways of building resilience and coping with the stigma and discrimination which MSM experience. Support from a partner lessens the social anxiety and isolation which fear of discrimination causes and reduces the negative emotions experienced when such discrimination is encountered.
- 4 Identifying safe spaces where MSM couples can express themselves freely, and demonstrate their love for one another, without fear of discrimination and implicit or explicit micro-aggressions.

These actions will support the journey towards better mental health and potentially lead to reduced HIV risk-taking behaviour.

