Unsupportive Social Interactions, Shame, and Psychological Well-being in People with HIV

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INTRODUCTION

- People living with HIV (PLWH) often experience illness-specific unsupportive social interactions (USI), including being blamed for their illness, forcing optimism, being overly critical, and distancing.
- USI are associated with poorer physical and psychological well-being.
- HIV-specific USI are a form of felt or enacted stigma, and may be associated with increased feelings of shame about one’s illness condition.
- Shame is an emotion that reflects internal feelings of inferiority, worthlessness, inadequacy, and alienation due to a behavior or a condition.
- Internalized shame may lead to poorer subjective ratings of overall well-being.
- Feelings of shame may be a factor that explains the relationship between unsupportive social interactions and poorer well-being.

HYPOTHESES

- HIV-specific USI will be associated with poorer psychological well-being (depression, positive affect, and perceived stress).
- More distancing, blaming, forced optimism, and insensitive interactions will be associated with higher levels of shame, which in turn will be associated with poorer psychological well-being.

PROCEDURE

- Participants completed an online questionnaire and were compensated with a $20.00 gift card.
- Measures included: Demographic Information, Unsupportive Social Interactions Scale, Internalized Shame Scale, Center for Epidemiological Studies-Depression Scale (CES-D), Negative Affect Subscale of the Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS), Perceived Stress Scale (PSS).

RESULTS

- Total Effects
  - Insensitive interactions were positively related to depression (b = .36, SE = .34, p < .01), negative affect (b = .61, SE = .26, p < .05), and perceived stress (b = .57, SE = .22, p < .05).
  - No other USI were associated with well-being.
  - Mediation
    - Only insensitive interactions operated on depression, negative affect, and perceived stress through higher levels of shame.

DISCUSSION

- Internalized feelings of shame appear to partially explain the relationship between insensitive interactions and psychological well-being.
- Psychotherapeutic interventions targeting internalized shame may have several benefits.
  - Reduction in psychological distress.
  - Lessened effects of insensitive or stigmatizing social interactions on the well-being of individuals living with HIV.
- Individuals living with HIV who experience less psychological distress may experience better illness outcomes, be more adherent to medication recommendations, and have slower disease progression.