

FORGETTING ABOUT HIV: PREP AS AN AFFECTIVE INTERVENTION FOR HIV ANXIETY

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Background:

Since pre-exposure prophylaxis for HIV (PrEP) has become a widely available HIV-prevention tool, the reduction and even removal of HIV anxiety has been widely reported as a side-effect. Despite recurring as a finding within behavioural research on PrEP, HIV anxiety and PrEP's anxiety-reducing effects remain under-theorised. This study sought to better understand PrEP's impact on HIV anxiety among gay and queer men by situating experiences of HIV anxiety and sex within broader biographical narratives of HIV. The analysis draws on affect theory to explain shifts in HIV anxiety precipitated by PrEP.

Methods:

This qualitative study involved semi-structured interviews with 18 gay and queer men born between 1981 and 1996, who were living in Australia and using PrEP for HIV prevention. Interviews were transcribed and analysed thematically.

Results:

Participants described their relationship to HIV as 'split' between two domains of experience: narratives of HIV stigma situated in what participants sometimes called the 'rational brain', and deep shame and fear they attached to experiences of unintended condomless sex (HIV anxiety) situated in what they called the 'lizard brain'. This split resembles a version of affect theory that posits a divide between cognition on the one hand, and affect on the other. While participants believed educational anti-stigma interventions were able to shift their 'rational' understandings of HIV stigma, learning more about HIV did not reduce HIV anxiety. In contrast, taking PrEP was able to reduce or even eliminate HIV anxiety in the 'lizard brain' by enabling a forgetting of HIV.

Conclusion:

By highlighting the limits of participants' attempts to reduce their own HIV anxiety through 'rational' engagement with anti-stigma messages, PrEP is revealed as a specifically affective intervention to reduce HIV anxiety. These findings point to a need to understand HIV anxiety as operating across multiple domains of experience. Interventions must therefore attend to this complexity.

Disclosure of Interest Statement:

None