

# Reducing HIV transmission in MSM couple relationships in Southern Africa by enhancing coping mechanisms

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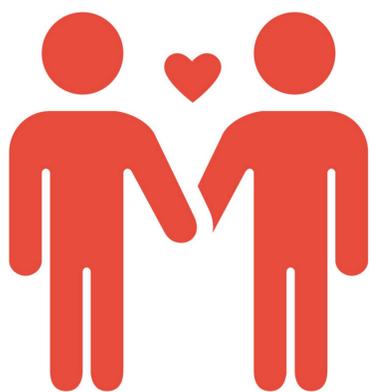
## Overview

Supporting the mental health needs of men who have sex with men (MSM) by building healthy coping mechanisms could reduce HIV transmission. Estimated HIV prevalence rates are high among MSM in South Africa (26.8%)<sup>i</sup> and Namibia (12.4%).<sup>ii</sup> In African contexts MSM are often exposed to homophobic social environments and subjected to minority stress which leads to adverse mental health outcomes. Minority stress refers to chronically high levels of stress among stigmatised minority groups<sup>iii</sup>. Poor mental health is associated with higher HIV risk behaviours such as unprotected sex, multiple sexual partners, and alcohol or substance use<sup>iii</sup>. The results presented are based on findings from in-depth interviews conducted during the formative qualitative phase of the study. The results indicated that MSM couples in both countries experience similar minority stressors despite legal protection in South Africa and the criminalisation of sodomy in Namibia.

## Methods

### Sample

27 MSM Couples:  
South Africa (n=16)  
Namibia (n=11)



### Data

MSM partners were interviewed separately to identify their key HIV risks, relationship challenges as well as defense and coping mechanisms

### Data Analysis

The data was analysed using a thematic analysis<sup>iv</sup>

## Results

### Defense Mechanisms<sup>iii</sup>

The following defense mechanisms were commonly used by participants however these are unlikely to resolve underlying issues. Mental healthcare interventions should challenge the use of unhelpful defense mechanism

#### Denial

Participants often denied that sexual orientation related stigma and discrimination caused distress

#### Hiding

Many participants coped with hostile environments and pressure to conform to heteronormative standards by hiding through acting straight or maintaining a concurrent heterosexual relationship to produce children

#### Substance & Alcohol Use

Participants who had difficulty exploring male-male sexual activity often reported using alcohol or substances to lower inhibitions or reduce pain during anal intercourse

## Coping Mechanisms<sup>v, vi</sup>

HIV risk behaviour among MSM couples could be reduced by enhancing mental healthcare that strengthens the following coping mechanisms:

### Open Communication

Open communication between partners to foster commitment, trust, and relationship planning

### Sexual Agreement

Clearly defined sexual agreements could reduce sexual risk behaviour such as infidelity and sexual experimentation outside the couple relationship

### Resilience

Building resilience to cope with homonegative stigma and discrimination

## Reducing HIV Risk Behaviour

### Safe Spaces

Identifying safe spaces allows couples to express themselves freely and connect with others without fear of being subjected to implicit or explicit microaggressions

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vi Perry, N. S., Huebner, D. M., Baucom, B. R., & Hoff, C. C. (2016). Relationship power, sociodemographics, and their relative influence on sexual agreements among gay male couples. *AIDS and Behavior*, 20(6), 1302-1314. Funding: The study was supported through funding from DFID and Mott MacDonald  
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