

UNVEILING THE PSYCHOLOGICAL JOURNEY OF HIV-POSITIVE INDIVIDUALS AMIDST THE COVID-19

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ABSTRACT: This phenomenological study investigates the challenges and coping strategies of people living with HIV during the COVID-19 pandemic, alongside deriving significant insights into their experiences. Utilizing a qualitative approach, the research involved ten HIV-positive individuals in Davao City, all of whom have been living with HIV for at least two years. These participants were selected through purposive sampling under the supervision of the Reproductive Health & Wellness Center Davao (RHWC) of the Davao City Health Office. Data were gathered and analyzed using thematic analysis to draw meaningful conclusions. The findings reveal challenges faced by HIV-positive individuals during the pandemic. These include deepened commitment to self-care, actively sought social support and extensive use of health services. In response to these adversities, participants employed various coping strategies. These strategies encompassed a strengthened commitment to self-care, active pursuit of social support, and extensive utilization of health services. These experiences, marked by both challenges and resilience, provide valuable insights into the unique psychological needs and fortitudes of this group. They underline the importance of crafting targeted interventions aimed at enhancing the mental health and overall well-being of HIV-positive individuals, particularly in the context of global health crises such as COVID-19.

KEYWORDS: *challenges, coping strategies, covid-19, HIV-positive individuals, mental health, psychological journey*

I. INTRODUCTION

During the COVID-19 pandemic and the escalating cases of the HIV epidemic worldwide, several researchers conducted ongoing studies on well-being. One such study focused on mental health (Kristie et al., 2020; Laurence, 2020 & Lewis et al., 2020). However, in the Philippines, few studies have been undertaken that concentrated on health system access for people living with HIV (PLHIV), and most of these studies were unrelated to the psychology and well-being of people living with HIV (Marco, 2021; Rosadino et al., 2021 & UNAIDS, 2021). To address this knowledge gap, the researcher undertook a qualitative study to collect personal experiences from people living with HIV (PLHIV) in the Philippines, specifically in the Davao Region, during the COVID-19 pandemic. This study aimed to better understand the psychological journey of people living with HIV and the challenges they encountered during the pandemic. The participants' experiences in this study utilized a stress-coping model that identified the sources and effects of COVID-19-related stress, as well as the elements that facilitated successful coping.

According to psychologist Mallory O. Johnson (2020) when coping tactics fail and distress endures, some people resort to highly negative, dangerous modes of coping, of which substance abuse is one. People's ability to cope is critical to their ability to function, and their ability to function is critical to how they handle their HIV and get involved in their recovery. According to a paper published in *AIDS and Behavior* (2020), these individuals have also experienced significant disruptions in medication adherence, with 28.6 percent missing a dose since the COVID-19 pandemic began and 11.4 percent of respondents reported skipping meals or reducing portions due to concerns about not having enough money for food. Additionally, people living with HIV may face greater social isolation during the pandemic than other populations (Shiau, 2020).

People living with HIV/AIDS and other autoimmune disorders are among the most disadvantaged in the COVID-19 period (Artiga et al., 2020, Chelkeba et al., 2020). Moreover, the COVID pandemic has more severe negative repercussions for certain populations than others, including job loss, food insecurity, failure to manage existing conditions, and difficulty in maintaining preventive measures such as social isolation and the use of personal protective equipment (PPE). Those who

live in extreme poverty have less control over their li

ving situation and immediate surroundings, and consequently face larger challenges to protecting themselves as well as their families compared to those who do not live in.

The researchers discovered that anxiety concerning access to antiretroviral therapy, righteous indignation over accidental HIV status disclosure, fear that coronavirus infection would have more serious repercussions for immunocompromised individuals, and exacerbated poverty and economic stress adversely affected mental stress during the pandemic. The relevance of this study supported the person living with HIV (PLHIV) community in overcoming the obstacles and challenges they faced throughout their lives. This benefited them in developing intrapersonal relationships and coping strategies. The research findings paved the path for the growth of the HIV/AIDS community.

The broader HIV/AIDS community is another primary beneficiary of this research. By increasing awareness of the unique challenges and coping strategies of HIV-positive persons, the study empowers the community to better advocate for necessary treatments, aid, and support. This is crucial not only during pandemic times but also in the general pursuit of improved healthcare and social support for HIV-positive individuals.

Lastly, this study is limited to HIV-positive individual's experiences, specifically, their challenges, coping strategies, and insights. Ten (10) participants have been HIV positive for at least two years, from Davao City, ages 18 years old and above, were the study participants. Five (5) participants were female, and five (5) participants were male. Using thematic analysis, the researcher interprets the data gathered from the participants.

Objectives of the Study

The objective of the study is to explore the experiences of HIV-positive individuals during COVID-19 pandemic that impacted their psychological wellbeing, HIV-positive individuals coping mechanism with the psychological challenges of COVID-19 pandemic, and insights can the study participants share with fellow HIV-positive individuals, in particular, and to the community, in general.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

The aim of this chapter is to review the writing accessible in this research study on the psychological impact of individuals living with HIV during the corona-virus pandemic. It will inspect the focal part of which aspects contributes to an individual living with HIV. Moreover, it will look at the psychological and present diverse speculations created on the impacts of HIV. At last, it will investigate how an individual living with HIV manages to deal with these challenges and adapts to the progress.

A qualitative study conducted by West, Ddaaki, Nakyanjo, Isabirye, Nakubulwa, Nalugoda, Kagaayi, and Kennedy (2021) used semi-structured in-depth interviews among people living with HIV in rural Rakai, south central Uganda. Found that the mental stress during COVID-19 was heightened by concerns about access to antiretroviral therapy, upset over accidental disclosure of HIV status, fear that corona-virus infection would have more severe consequences for immunocompromised individuals, and exacerbated poverty and economic stress. Moreover, the researchers also recommend mental health support for people living with HIV deserves greater attention during the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond. The mental health impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on people living with HIV are poorly understood, especially in low-income settings. According to Panda and Sharawat (2020), the most common behavioral/emotional disorders are anxiety; stress; melancholy; boredom; depressive symptoms; sleep disturbance; and fear of the situation.

Additionally, a substantial number of people have lost their jobs and regular income as a result of the pandemic, disturbing their financially stable family environment. Additionally, anger, post-traumatic stress disorder, and emotional weariness are reported to be extremely prevalent. Saurabh and Ranjan (2020) found that, whereas quarantined children had a greater prevalence of psychological co-morbidities, even non-quarantined children had a relatively higher prevalence of these disorders when compared to pre-COVID research on children. Thus, it appears that the COVID-19 pandemic has a significant negative effect on children's psychological profiles, which is exacerbated by quarantine measures, significantly decreasing their chances of recovery. Individuals of African ancestry, and those living in resource-poor nations are much more likely to face hurdles to care and mortality from COVID-19. Person living with co-morbidities such as diabetes, cardiovascular illness, or lung disease are at an even higher disadvantage than PLHIV without co-morbidities.

The researchers looked through the current literature and found no evidence of a greater COVID-19 prevalence among PLWH, but contradictory data on increased mortality and poor clinical outcomes. Experiencing HIV does not protect you against COVID-19's severe manifestations. Several trials that looked at antiretroviral medications for HIV to treat SARS-CoV-2 found no benefit in terms of mortality. Thus, changing antiretroviral

treatment (ART) regimens among virologically subdued PLWH to prevent COVID-19 is not recommended. During the pandemic, HIV care delivery has been negatively affected in several countries, but this has created an opportunity to accelerate beneficial strategies such as multi-month AR. In the future, decentralizing HIV care in low-resource settings and incorporating telemedicine in high-resource ones will be crucial in preventing healthcare system shocks.

III. METHODOLOGY

This study involved the participation of ten (10) HIV Positive individuals from facets of life who have been positive for at least two years. According to Morse (1994) the necessity of having a minimum of six participants in a phenomenological study, while Creswell (1998) suggested a participant range from five to twenty-five for such a study. The study was conducted in the facility of Reproductive Health and Wellness Center facility (RHWC) in Davao City. The respondents were People Living with Human Immunodeficiency Virus (PLHIV).

In this thesis, purposive sampling was chosen for its ability to capture detailed insights into the psychological experiences of HIV-positive individuals during COVID-19. This method specifically targeted individuals who could offer diverse and rich perspectives on living with HIV, focusing on their unique emotional and coping experiences during the pandemic. This approach was key in obtaining comprehensive insights aligned with the study's objectives, exploring the nuanced psychological aspects of the HIV-positive community's experiences amidst COVID-19 challenges.

An in-depth interview guide that was validated by the University of Mindanao's research committee was used to assist in questioning participants and probing for rich data to address the study's research questions. A series of carefully constructed based on previous studies conducted on the research instruments an interrelated open-ended question is developed. Additionally, the interview guide underwent validation from five (5) subject matter experts. Following data collection from participants, the researcher transcribed audio recordings and conducted a thematic analysis. The interview guide received validation from five (5) subject matter experts, achieving an average rating of 8.8, described as Good. Consequently, the utilized interview guide is confirmed to be valid.

In data collection, the researcher used in-depth interviews via Zoom meetings or phone call interviews. This method was chosen to help in finding answers to the research questions of the study. This gives the researcher an advantage of the methods complementing one another, thereby strengthening the findings. An in-depth interview guide that was validated by the University of Mindanao Research Committee was used to aid in interviewing the participants and in probing to gain rich data to answer the research questions in this study. A set of carefully designed and related open-ended questions is constructed wherein the participants are allowed to answer the questions freely and in-depth.

In analyzing the data, the researcher follows Colaizzi's (1978) phenomenology data analysis model as well as the current data qualitative analytical procedures of Saldaña (2013) which highlights conceptual patterns and describes the processes that the researcher in this study. As previously mentioned, the study was guided by a phenomenological framework. Firmly based on qualitative research, phenomenology provides an avenue for discovering the lived experiences of HIV positive individuals. From these stories, I searched for comparisons as to how the participants experienced the phenomenon; as meaning ultimately evolved from relationships in the data (Colaizzi, 1978; Morrow, Rodriguez, & King, 2015). Data collected through the interview protocol provided a rich description of the experiences of the participants as well as how they coped with their roles.

The researcher confidently established the truth of the findings based on the research design, informants, and context. To promote credibility through peer debriefing, member checks, peer scrutiny of the research project, negative case analysis, reflective commentary, triangulation, and thick description of the phenomenon in question (Shenton, 2014). In addition, the researcher ensures the credibility of the study by making sure that the informants are identified and described accurately (Holloway, 2005). The researcher also demonstrated to the informants to recognize that research findings are their own experiences (Spexiale and Carpenter, 2011),

Furthermore, the researcher establishes the dependability of the study, by ensuring consistency of data collection and analysis by doing the code-recode system during data reduction and applying the peer examination and investigator triangulation of the data collected and analyzed. It also refers to whether the findings would be consistent if the study were replicated with the same subjects or similar subjects in the same or similar context (Guba, 2011). A technique the researcher used is to promote dependability by providing an in-depth

methodological description to allow the study to be repeated. Critical to this process is the establishment of an audit trail that allows others to trace the course of the research step-by-step via the decisions made and procedures described (Shenton, 2014). This makes the study reliable.

To address the confirmability of the study, the researcher set aside personal opinions, expectations, and judgments to guard against the falsehood of data. The use of audio-tape interviews, note-taking, and journals kept throughout the study is one way of ensuring confirmability. It also refers to the degree to which the findings are a function solely of the informants and not of other conditions of the research and not researcher biases, motivations, and perspectives.

Finally, the researcher implemented the triangulation method to validate the study. This involved collecting data from various sources and using multiple strategies to address the research questions, as outlined by De Vault (2017). Additionally, a panel of experts reviewed and confirmed the study's findings, ensuring their credibility and reliability.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Experiences of HIV-Positive Individuals that Impacted their Psychological Well-being

The participants of the study shared their life experiences during the pandemic. The major themes were exacerbated social isolation, financial challenges, and relentless fear of infection. Also, on the challenges experienced by HIV-positive individuals amidst the pandemic, four (4) themes emerged.

According to the study findings, the HIV-positive individuals experienced Exacerbated Social Isolation during the pandemic. HIV-positive individuals have faced a dual burden of health concerns and exacerbated social isolation amidst the pandemic (Panda et al., 2020). For people with HIV, social isolation may be exacerbated by the stigma and discrimination they face from society, leading to further withdrawal from social interactions to avoid potential judgment or rejection (Santarpia et al., 2020). In addition, this study revealed that out of fear of infecting their loved ones, some HIV-positive individuals have chosen to distance themselves from their families, contributing to a deepened sense of isolation. Moreover, prolonged social isolation can increase loneliness, anxiety, and depression. The lack of in-person social support may exacerbate existing mental health conditions and make it challenging to cope with stress and uncertainty (Bayani, 2020). The inability to engage in social activities and connect with others can create a sense of detachment and affect emotional well-being (Panda et al., 2020). Furthermore, the study results show that HIV-positive individuals were Financially Challenged during the COVID-19 pandemic. The broad social and economic impacts on HIV-positive individuals exacerbate existing financial vulnerabilities. Economic hardships from job losses or decreased income have impeded their access to crucial healthcare and treatment. These challenges are set against widening health inequalities, including economic disparities, making it even more difficult for this population to receive quality care (Gotter et al., 2020 & Lee et al., 2020). In addition, the pandemic-induced disruption of HIV testing and management services has had cascading economic effects, delayed diagnoses, and potentially escalating long-term healthcare costs (Mirzaei et al., 2020). The necessary adaptation of HIV programs to the pandemic landscape has also introduced financial challenges. The shift towards digital platforms for service delivery may result in added costs and risk, excluding those unable to afford or access the necessary technology, thus deepening economic inequalities (Wirtzet al., 2020).

Coping Strategies of HIV-Positive Individuals Amidst COVID Pandemic

During the COVID-19 outbreak, HIV-positive individuals have adopted various survival techniques, such as enhancing their focus on personal well-being, proactively engaging in community and emotional support, and making comprehensive use of medical services. These methods reflect their adaptability and resilience in facing the compounded health challenges brought about by the pandemic. Three (3) primary themes have surfaced regarding how HIV-positive individuals coped during the pandemic.

HIV-positive individuals' first coping strategy during the pandemic was Deepened Commitment to Self-Care. While self-care, including adherence to antiretroviral therapy, balanced nutrition, and mental health care, is essential for maintaining health and immune function, it faces numerous challenges (O'Brien et al., 2021). Obstacles such as disrupted healthcare services, fear of facility visits, and financial stress potentially compromise the practice of necessary self-care routines, risking worse health outcomes and higher healthcare costs (Averi, 2020).

The study highlights the Extensively Used Health Services as a pivotal coping strategy among HIV-positive individuals during the COVID-19 pandemic. Participants took a proactive stance by securing antiretroviral therapy (ART) medications in advance. This advanced procurement served as a crucial coping mechanism, ensuring treatment continuity and reducing the risk of transmission (Ahmed et al., 2022; Torres et al., 2021). While

the approach underscores the resilience and adaptability of these individuals, it also points to challenges for healthcare systems.

The uptick in demand for ART medications necessitates a reevaluation of healthcare logistics. Supply chain inefficiencies, availability of medications, and prescription flexibility are crucial to preventing potential interruptions in treatment (Ganguanco, 2019; Fathima et al., 2022). The study reveals that despite these challenges, the Philippine health system has shown the capability to meet increased demands, exemplifying the resilience of both the individuals and the healthcare system itself (Alibudbud, 2021). Therefore, while proactive healthcare management has proven beneficial for HIV-positive individuals, it also emphasizes the need for healthcare systems to adapt and ensure equitable treatment access for vulnerable groups.

Insights That HIV-Positive Individuals Can Share with Others

The study highlights that individuals with HIV have gleaned crucial understandings during the COVID-19 crisis. These vital insights, valid for the broader community, focus on the necessity of deep self-reflection, proactive approaches to risk, and the pivotal role of staying socially connected. Three (3) key themes emerged concerning the essential insights gained by HIV-positive individuals during the pandemic.

According to the study's findings, the HIV-positive individuals stressed the importance of Heightened Introspection during the pandemic. The participants shared their unique experiences of navigating life with HIV during the COVID-19 pandemic; HIV-positive individuals have engaged in heightened introspection. Their insights, born from deep self-reflection and resilience, offer valuable lessons for others. These insights range from practical self-care strategies to profound understandings of health, resilience, and the importance of support networks. Their experiences illustrate the power of introspection and self-awareness in the face of adversity and offer a roadmap for others living with chronic health conditions on maintaining psychological well-being, effectively managing health behaviors, and advocating for better healthcare services (Areri, 2020; Turan et al., 2017 & Mengistu et al., 2022). In the face of the COVID-19 pandemic, individuals with HIV have emphasized the importance of Proactive Responses to Risks. Adapting to a rapidly changing work environment and complying with new health protocols have become integral yet challenging components of self-care (Labisi, 2022; Sayed et al., 2023).

Furthermore, based on the study results, the Importance of Social Connectedness was one of the significant insights HIV-positive individuals learned during the pandemic. Establishing and maintaining supportive networks is crucial to their psychological well-being (Sherr et al., 2020). For HIV-positive individuals, the correlation between social isolation and depression can be quite pronounced in this study. Despite the challenges of the pandemic, many have made concerted efforts to remain connected with their friends to mitigate depressive symptoms. Online communities have become vital, offering new avenues for social connection and support, especially for those living with chronic illnesses like HIV who face added barriers to physical socialization (Villegas, 2020).

V. CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATION

This part presents the implications for practice, future research, and concluding remarks based on the study results. It is clearly stated that this study aims to determine the challenges experienced by HIV-positive individuals during the pandemic, the coping strategies used to face the challenges experienced amidst the pandemic, and significant insights that HIV individuals have learned during the pandemic.

Implication for Practice

This phenomenological study, while not aimed at generalization, offers crucial insights suggestive of the lived experiences of HIV-positive individuals, particularly during the challenges posed by the pandemic. The exploration yielded ten distinct themes, indicative of not only the struggles such as exacerbated social isolation, financial hardships, relentless fear of infection, and emotional devastation but also the resilience and coping strategies employed. These findings may be invaluable for clinical practice, especially for healthcare professionals working with HIV-positive individuals. They provide a deeper understanding, which could guide clinicians in tailoring their approaches to patient care. Recognizing the importance of addressing these unique challenges, healthcare providers may develop more empathetic and effective strategies, particularly in mental health support.

Furthermore, the coping strategies identified – deepened commitment to self-care, actively seeking social support, and extensive use of health services – could provide a framework for clinical interventions. Healthcare professionals might incorporate these strategies into treatment plans, encouraging patients to engage in self-care and effectively utilize available support systems.

Implication for Future Research

This research offers a window into the experiences and coping mechanisms of HIV-

positive individuals in the Philippines during the COVID-19 pandemic, which implies the need for more comprehensive studies in this area. The connection between heightened introspection, self-care, and health outcomes in this population is suggestive of a complex interplay that may vary significantly within the Philippines' unique cultural and social context. Exploring this further through mixed-methods research could lead to a richer understanding of these dynamics.

Concluding Remarks

In conducting this study on the lived experiences of HIV-positive individuals in the Philippines during the COVID-19 pandemic, I have gained profound insights and learned valuable lessons. The study highlighted the stark challenges faced by this community, such as intensified social isolation, financial strain, and a relentless fear of infection, underscoring their heightened vulnerabilities in a global crisis. These insights were eye-opening, revealing the depth of adversity faced by individuals often overlooked in our society.

Simultaneously, the resilience and coping strategies that emerged – heightened introspection, diligent self-care, and a strong pursuit of social support – were not just academic observations but deeply inspiring. These positive themes spoke to the incredible strength and adaptability of these individuals, a testament to the human spirit's capacity to endure and thrive even in the most challenging times. This realization has been both humbling and empowering, emphasizing the resilience inherent in each person.

From this study, I've learned the critical importance of empathy, compassion, and social connectedness in supporting those facing adversity. It has also underscored the need for targeted interventions that address both the mental health and overall well-being of vulnerable populations. Personally, this research has reinforced my commitment to advocating for these communities and contributing to a healthcare environment that is more inclusive, empathetic, and responsive to individual needs.

As we move forward, it is crucial to carry these lessons with us. This pandemic has not only been a challenge but also an opportunity to learn and grow, both professionally and personally. The value of understanding, compassion, and connectedness cannot be overstated in fostering a supportive environment for all, especially for those confronting significant challenges.

VI. ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

In the name of Allah, the most gracious and the most merciful. First and foremost, I am grateful to Allah Subhanahu Wa Ta'ala for providing me with the opportunity, knowledge, strength, and capacity to start this study and finish it successfully. I would like to express my gratitude to my esteemed previous adviser, Prof. Dr. Ronadora Evarado-Deala, RPsy, RGC, Rpm, LPT, PhD, and my current adviser, Dr. Ryan Dale B. Elnar, Rpm, PhD, CCC, RCC, Professor, Graduate Studies, University of Mindanao, Adjunct Professor, Yorkville University, Fredericton, Canada, whose professional guidance and demeanor were invaluable in helping me finish this thesis. For providing data analysis and thematic table results for this study effort, I am also grateful to Prof. Dr. Michelle Yap Acledan, PhD, Assistant Vice-President, HR Development Center, University of Mindanao, Davao City.

I am appreciative of the encouragement and motivation I had from my professors during my bachelor's program: Drs. Estelita Gayak, Junaib Usman, Margie Fiesta, Noel Biadnes, Aida Tan, Rosario Ungsod, and Juliano. Regarding my graduate studies, I would like to thank Prof. Dr. Ericson D. Batican, who is a concurrent professor at both the University of Mindanao and Ateneo de Davao University. Additionally, I would like to thank Profs. Jerson John Trocio, Jerlyn G. Balones, Ronadora E. Deala, Ryan Dale B. Elnar, and Silvino P. Josol, Jr. I am grateful to Dr. Jordana Ramitere, who oversees the Reproductive Health and Wellness Center (RHWC) in Davao City, for approving my plan to include RHWC patients in my research. Also, I would like to express my gratitude to the People Living with HIV (PLHIV) receiving care from RHWC for their participation in my study by sharing their hopes and worries during the pandemic.

To my Panel of Experts, led by Drs. Fe D. Arcenas, RPsy, PhD, Jerson John Trocio, RPsy, PhD, Joel B. Tan, Rpm, PhD, and Emma C. Ceballo, MAEd, MSPsy, RGC, Rpm, LPT for lending their time, expertise, contributions to the panel discussion to help improve and strengthen my study, your presence on the panel was a privilege. I am incredibly appreciative of my family's encouragement, support, and genuine interest in my academic accomplishments. I would like to thank my children, Yuseuff Nasri and Jevaryle Fahlid for their unwavering moral support. You inspire me to be the best father I can be; you are the reason for my labor and sacrifice. My closest friends, Camille Fernandez for her technical help, Alyssa Ken D. Pural, Theresa Marie Tajos, Clint Cyrus P. Salcor, and Remus Romulus T. Millan for

his financial support deserves my sincere gratitude for their unwavering support during this entire process.

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