Young people's sexual and reproductive health in the context of HIV and AIDS: adaptation and modification of group discussion material

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Outline

- Background – the context (briefly)
- Psycho-educational interventions – what works or not?
- The ‘Auntie Stella’ cards …
- Pilot trialling the cards – benefits of the approach
- Tensions / challenges that arose …
- Further plans and developments
We cannot afford to wait to take action: 350-500 Aids-related deaths in SA every day!

We have to talk openly about HIV and AIDS: so everyone understands dangers of unprotected sex, & responsibilities to protect themselves and their partners. The silence and stigma surrounding HIV & AIDS must be replaced by openness, good communication and compassion.

(From http://www.etu.org.za/toolbox/docs/aids/prevention.html)
Background 1: The South African context

- Young women (age 15-24), particularly vulnerable to new infections:
  - Many contextual factors prevent young women from engaging in safer sexual practices (Shisana et al., 2014). Barriers to prevention of unwanted pregnancies, or to guard against STIs that result from unprotected sex

- Complex reasons for challenges to young women’s sexual and reproductive health ...
  - relate to economic conditions of poverty and the accessing of desirable goods, gender-based violence and women’s lower status, especially in rural and peri-urban contexts.

- The higher incidence of infections in peri-urban and rural communities relate to circular migration of younger people (Thomas, 2015) and the lack of access to adequate and acceptable sexual healthcare facilities in these under-resourced areas (Welaga et al., 2011)
Background 2: Interventions

Life Orientation in school curricula (ca.2000) -> more widespread sex education
But, compromised teacher support and training & predominantly didactic approach;
low motivation of teachers and discomfort re material,
& high dropout rates in schools (especially amongst females) ...

all impact on quality, accuracy of delivery of the material and ‘reach’ (Avert, 2015).

Individual-focus of didactic and information-based approaches based on faulty assumptions re rational decision-making & agency in sensitive arena of interpersonal sexual interactions.

Above all confirmed by work of team led by Van der Riet in Eastern Cape: rational knowledge does not lead to shifts in sexual behaviour because the latter is so deeply enmeshed with identity and other contextually-pressing issues.

Thus, enabling behaviour change in sexually risky situations needs more in-depth and sustained psycho-educational interventions.
Background to the project

- Evolved due to confluence of factors ...

- **Auntie Stella: Teenagers talk about sex, life and relationships** (see [http://www.tarasc.org/auntiestella/](http://www.tarasc.org/auntiestella/)) cards developed & widely used in Zimbabwe (as well as parts of Zambia, Tanzania and Malawi). Permission for trial from the Training and Research Support Centre (TARSC) Harare.

- Features: move from individual knowledge to incorporate psychosocial and structural factors; challenging social norms that lead to vulnerabilities; to enhance protective behaviours, including group interventions
Dear Auntie Stella,

I have been with my boyfriend since I was 19, he was 22. We were very much in love and now, three years later, we have a beautiful child together. I had never been intimate with anyone else besides him. But, 6 months ago he started coming home late, he said he was working but I was sure that he was seeing someone else. I am really scared about getting AIDS and so I built up the courage to ask him to use a condom. He got very angry and accused me of not trusting him.

Then I found out that he actually had been seeing another woman who lived just two streets away from us. He admitted that she was his other girlfriend, and said he was going to break up with her because he only truly loves me. I then said I wouldn't have sex with him until he went to get an HIV test, but he absolutely refused. He says he really doesn't want to know. This has been going on for about a month now, and I make him sleep on the couch. He gets angry and says no-one should treat him or her true love like this. But, what else can I do? I still love him a lot but I'm terrified of getting HIV from him. What should I do? Perhaps I shouldn't have gotten involved with a man at such a young age.

Grace

Talking points

• What are the advantages of having a child with someone at such a young age?
• Do men always seek sex outside of a relationship after a while? Why is this?
• Young women have the highest rate of HIV infection in Southern Africa. Why do you think this is and what can be done about it?
• What do you think Grace should do now?

Answer: My boyfriend treats me badly

Dear Grace,

Committing and having a child with somebody at such a young age does often cause problems. This is usually because young people are still changing and they don’t know what they want in life yet. You should know that many young women like you are refusing to have sex with their boyfriends without using condoms. Women are standing up for themselves when they know their partner is being unfaithful, and they insist on condom use.

You have been very brave about standing up to your boyfriend to protect yourself; this is the right thing to do, especially because you have a young child to consider as well. One option for you is to use a female condom. But you can’t go on like this forever, you both need to have an HIV test. Try to talk to your boyfriend about it again, and be understanding about his fears. Let him know that either way it is better for him to know his status because if he is HIV positive he can start receiving early antiretroviral therapy before it gets to late.

If he still refuses, let him know what you are thinking and whether he is willing to save your marriage or not. You have been brave and are doing the right thing. Good luck.

Auntie Stella

Action points

• What are your thoughts on asking your partner to use a condom when you have already been engaging in unsafe sex?
• If you felt strongly on using a condom and your partner does not agree, would you think about ending the relationship?
• Negotiation skills
My ‘sugar daddy’ is treating me badly

Dear Auntie Stella,

I dropped out of school when I was 16. I have a boyfriend who is a rich businessman. I met him three months ago and my friends told me to go out with him because he had the three C’s: cash, car, and cell phone. They also told me that men like this would buy me nice clothing and take me out to expensive restaurants. At first he gave me nice gifts. He used to spend time with me and we used to go and stay at hotels. Now he just wants sex and then he leaves. He shouts at me if I ask for anything and calls me a prostitute.

Last week I asked him to use a condom because I felt safer that way and he got really angry and hurt me a lot when we had sex. He says that if I want anything from him, we have to have sex without condoms. He has also said nothing more about helping me to become a model. I boasted about him to my friends at first, they will laugh at me if I tell them any of this. I am embarrassed. What can I do?

Mercy

Talking points

- Why do you think older men like to have younger girlfriends?
- Why do you think younger women like to have older boyfriends?
- What advice would you give Mercy?

Answer: My sugar daddy treats me badly

Dear Mercy,

I am sorry to hear that your boyfriend is no longer treating you well. Unfortunately, this sort of thing tends to happen in relationships where there is an older and richer man involved. Older men like younger women because they are attractive, willow, and they do not complain. Sometimes, it’s even because they think that younger women are free from HIV.

In cases like this, the relationship is not equal, and when the man gets tired of the younger woman he starts to break his promises and treats her badly. Sadly, this is what is happening to you.

It is not safe to have sex without condoms, especially if you think your boyfriend has been cheating on you.

I hope that you decide to leave your boyfriend because this relationship cannot make you happy. You need to try to find a relationship where you and your boyfriend are equal, and you can say what you want.

Think about your future and how to make your dreams come true. If you learn other skills, you can earn some money to do your modelling course. It is important to have an education too so that you have other job options. I hope you make the right decision; you deserve better.

Mercy

Action points

- What do you think about young women being with older men for the benefits of money?
- Do you think having a sugar daddy could result in a happy relationship?
- Risks of transactional sex
I was raped

Dear Auntie Stella,

I don’t know when I can talk to about this, because it was a long time ago but I am feeling the consequences now. When I was younger my uncle always hugged us children and gave us presents, but then he started looking at me differently and when him and I were alone he would touch me inappropriately. I was scared but he said that it had to stay a secret otherwise we would both get into trouble.

This weekend he came down for a funeral, all the parents were drinking alcohol. When I went outside he grabbed me, pushed me to the floor, and had sex with me. It was very painful but he hit me when I cried. He then said it was my fault because I was wearing a bra that made him need to have sex. Please tell me what to do. I am scared to tell my parents because my uncle helps my family with food and money, but I really don’t want him to do it again. I’m so scared. What can I do?

Grace

Talking points

- What is rape? Is it common in your community? Are the rapists usually strangers or members of the family?
- In this scenario, who was responsible for what happened? What was the reason for her uncle to behave like that?
- Is a woman ever to blame for being raped merely because of the clothing she is wearing? Is ‘sexy’ dressing ‘asking for it’?
- What advice would you give her?
- What would you do if you were raped?

Answer: I was raped

Dear Grace,

I am so sorry to hear about your situation and what you have been through. What your uncle did was very wrong and it is not your fault. He committed a crime and he should be stopped from doing this again.

Don’t be afraid: you must tell someone about this immediately. You cannot keep this a secret anymore. Tell your parents, or another relative that you can trust. You need to get some advice and support from someone who will help you to go to the police and get further help.

Report this rape as soon as possible, and try to not wash or change your clothes in case the police want to use it as evidence. You also need to seek health care for protection from pregnancy (the ‘morning after pill’). Some clinics also have drugs that can protect you from HIV if necessary. These are called post-exposure prophylaxis (PEP) drugs and should be taken within three days of the rape incident.

You need to know that rape is never the victim’s fault. There are a few ways to try and prevent it. Try not to walk alone, especially at night. You should also never consume too much alcohol that may impair your decision making process. Also, when you are in a relationship with a boy, make sure you make it clear when you do or do not want to have sex. I hope you find the help that you need.

Auntie Stella

Action points

- Why is there so much rape and violence against women in our society?
- What could we do to try and prevent this?
- Discuss what there is to know about the morning after pill and PEP.
Research questions

➢ How do groups of young women respond to the content of the cards (e.g. which cards do they find most helpful, provocative, relevant; which need contextually relevant modification and their applicability across different settings)?

➢ How does the use of the cards in the focus group settings influence young women’s knowledge, and what are their reflections on the utility and personal impact of the cards and associated methodology?
Participants have found the discussions interesting and useful to some extent. These participants are particularly well-educated on women’s rights and sexual health, which could be a limitation in trialling the cards.

Topics of cards used so far: women struggling to negotiate condom use, find their partners have been cheating on them or treating them badly, or about transactional sex. In these cases participants have spoken about the need for education for these women, as they say they would leave their partners under these circumstances.

Most recent meeting included a card on cervical cancer: most participants did not know about causes or prevention. This card was beneficial & additional hand-outs provided. They have found the content of the cards relevant, but I’m not sure they mean it is relevant to themselves as they already know what they would do in these situations.

The sugar daddy card brought up very interesting conversation that included the legalisation of prostitution, which may also decrease human trafficking, what women ‘are allowed’ to wear.

Card that included the suggestion of the female condom: beneficial because it is not something that they often think of, so questions asked about how they work, thus also a good educational card.

The final focus group cards are about ARVs, and mother to child transmission of HIV which are likely to be beneficial, due to the content on the topics that will be provided.
They have found the discussions interesting because it is not something that comes up in conversation very often, so have enjoyed thinking about these things.

As an education tool for young teenagers and those who live in rural areas, we think these cards would be very beneficial.

Relationships built, and a sense of having made a contribution?

Participants ‘stayed the course’, committed to the process

BUT...
Tensions / challenges ...

- The content of the cards (if relatively similar): rather monotonous, perhaps more suited for young teenagers and less educated women. ... So implications for careful selection of cards to suit group

- Related to the cards used so far: might need to change the scenario completely to suit the university context, with less ‘obvious’ lessons to learn; so they need to be modified further for the use of young more educated adults.

- Slightly tedious process: once we have reached Auntie Stella’s answer and the action points, we have already discussed those items, thus they may be unnecessary?
So how do we take the ideas further?

We’re busy translating the cards into isiXhosa / isiZulu;
Trial the methodology in the vernacular, and with younger less educated participants;
Refine the content of the cards for people over 18, resulting from our research;
Consider ways of trialling these in peri-urban and rural contexts;
Expand and take broader ‘community-based’ participatory approach / work with young men too;
Potentially ‘manualise’ and provide materials for use across contexts (and maybe in schools’ LO curriculum).
To conclude ...

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THANK YOU ... QUESTIONS & COMMENTS?

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