

The importance of the family: a longitudinal study of the predictors of depression in HIV patients in South Africa

CITATION

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ABSTRACT

As a chronic illness, HIV/AIDS requires life-long treatment adherence and retention—and thus sufficient attention to the psychosocial dimensions of chronic disease care in order to produce favourable antiretroviral treatment (ART) outcomes in a sustainable manner. Given the high prevalence of depression in chronic HIV patients, there is a clear need for further research into the determinants of depression in this population. In order to comprehensively study the predictors of depressive symptoms in HIV patients on ART, the socio-ecological theory postulates to not only incorporate the dominant individual-level and the more recent community-level approaches, but also incorporate the intermediate, but crucial family-level approach. The present study aims to extend the current literature by simultaneously investigating the impact of a wide range individual-level, family-level and community-level determinants of depression in a sample of 435 patients enrolled in the Free State Province of South Africa public-sector ART program. Structural equation modeling is used to explore the relationships between both latent and manifest variables at two time points. Besides a number of individual-level correlates—namely education, internalized and external stigma, and avoidant and seeking social support coping styles—of depressive symptoms in HIV patients on ART, the study also revealed the important role of family functioning in predicting depression. While family attachment emerged as the only factor to continuously and negatively impact depression at both time points, the second dimension of family functioning, changeability, was the only factor to produce a negative cross-lagged effect on depression. The immediate and long-term impact of family functioning on depression draws attention to the role of family dynamics in the mental health of people living with HIV/AIDS. In addition to individual-level and community-based factors, future research activities should also incorporate the role of the family context in research into the mental health of HIV patients, as our results demonstrate that the familial context in which a person with HIV on ART resides is inextricably interconnected with his/her health outcomes.