

CHAPTER 7

CONCLUSION

7.1 CONCLUSION

The study attempted to provide a view of the experiences that women diagnosed with HIV go through on daily basis. It also gives an indication of how they cope with their lives, considering their situation. The knowledge of being infected with HIV brought many changes in the participants' lives. Bearing this in mind, a deeper understanding of how these women make it through life was found to be necessary.

The study also gave a review of the literature on women with HIV and their experiences. The researcher used a qualitative research design to enter into the life worlds of the women and shared their experiences with them through their own descriptions. This provided the researcher with the necessary information for the study and provided the women with an opportunity to talk about their experiences.

Living with HIV-infection and trying to cope with that situation is made up of diverse experiences for women, such as those set out in the two previous chapters. These experiences differed from woman to woman, but they were also almost similar for all women at different times. After the diagnosis, all women in the study went through almost similar experiences emotionally.

Emotions ranged from anger, sadness, hurt, hatred, and depression to courage. The next difficult experience after knowing the diagnosis was disclosing the HIV-positive status to other people. In general, it looked like family members were more sensitive and supported the women unconditionally, but some women still experienced rejection from their families. Other negative reactions from people in general were verbalised by the women. This brought up the understanding of the difficulties these women go through on daily basis. In the beginning, it seemed difficult for

women to even think about making it to the next day, and in two instances the women attempted suicide.

The ways in which the women coped with their HIV status were found to be almost similar for all the women. All women used both problem-focused and emotion-focused coping.

Even though problem-focused coping is said to be mainly used when the situation is appraised as changeable, women in this study still used that type of coping to help them to assess the situation and look at ways of prolonging their lives. Emotion-focused coping continued to be used throughout, that is, from immediately after the diagnosis until the time of the interview. The emotion-focused strategies used included denial, avoidance, acceptance and religious faith. These strategies were used in an attempt to reduce the negative emotions associated with the experiences and to avoid further emotional pain. The context seemed to play a role in the experiences and the coping strategies employed by women infected with HIV.

7.2 LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

The four respondents who participated in the study represent a select group of women. They are all black and live in urban areas. They also have access to medical care in the form of medical treatment, counselling and psychotherapy. The respondents' experiences and coping strategies they use to cope with HIV are diverse and rich, but they do not fully represent all women in South Africa. The results are also not representative of all black women, particularly those living in rural areas.

The number of participants used for the study could have been larger. A larger number could have helped in bringing up additional themes and more elaboration regarding the experiences and coping of HIV-infected women.

It is very difficult for HIV-infected women to talk about their experiences. It is even less practical to include their partners and family members in the study.

It will be interesting to know how these people are affected by what the women experience.

All the interviews were audio-recorded. The audio-recorder may have intruded on the interview process, despite reassurances from the researcher that all information will be anonymous and confidential.

The motivation for participating in the study may also have affected the outcome of the study. This motivation could range from genuine interest in helping to an expectation of some sort, e.g. an agreement with the researcher to offer her help whenever it is needed. The researcher's officer's rank in the organisation, may also have contributed in the participants' eagerness to participate in the study. This is still possible even with the participants signing an informed consent.

7.3 RECOMMENDATIONS

This study focused on black women living in urban areas. It is therefore recommended that further research be conducted with women from other race and cultural groups which will make cross-cultural comparisons possible. It is also important to conduct research studies with women in rural areas because it is possible that their experiences and the way they cope with their lives are completely different from those of women in this study, since the context is thought to play a role in experiences and coping. The fact that rural women often come from low socio-economic backgrounds will most likely play a role in the results that can be expected to be obtained.

The study also focused on women who are not having serious symptoms yet. The themes obtained in the study may have been different if the study was conducted on people who are more symptomatic. It is therefore recommended that similar studies be conducted on people who are in advanced stages of the illness, bearing in mind that it is expected that more and more people will be symptomatic in a few years to come. The need for

more research on the subject of HIV and AIDS can therefore never be overemphasised.

Women infected with HIV have enough to deal with already without having to also carry around other people's prejudices. More effort should be directed at helping those living with HIV to be able to live without fear of being stigmatised. Various instances have been reported in South African newspapers over time that it even went to an extent of HIV-infected women being killed for revealing their status.

The results of this study have demonstrated that women need access to appropriate information on HIV and how it specifically affects women. Education on HIV should address the type of information that would be of help and how this information can be presented to the different socio-economic groups of women in the country. Alternative methods of education should be looked at in case of many illiterate people, especially in the rural areas. Stage plays and puppets could be used to educate people.

There seem to be too many organisations working on behalf of people living with HIV, and as a result, it becomes difficult for them to get finances. Lack of this type of instrumental support makes it difficult for people with HIV to cope with their everyday lives. A possible approach could be for these organisations to come together and form one big and more organised structure with more power to work on behalf of people infected with HIV. It is very important that HIV-infected people themselves become more involved in the running of such structures because they are the ones who know better about their lives and their condition.

All the women in this study indicated the need to belong to a support group. It is difficult for such groups to be formed because HIV-infected people still find it difficult to disclose their status. Those groups that are in existence are unable to cater for everybody because they may be far from where some people are living. Greatest comfort and sympathy could be gained from other women in similar situations. Worth (1990) has stated that women find it

ERRATA

Change the word "loose" to "lose" on the following pages

- p. 10, line 22
- p. 69, line 9
- p. 71, line 28
- p. 72, line 11
- p. 74, line 12
- p. 80, line 14 & 15

Change the word "loosing" to "losing" on

- p. 17, line 11
- p. 72, line 5, 6, 8
- p. 80, line 10
- p. 82, line 11

- p. 11, line 19: "women are" should be "women were"
- p. 12, line 21: "legions" should read "lesions"
- p. 17, line 25: "reported against" should be "reported by"
- p. 17, line 26: "occur" should be "occurs"
- p. 25, line 27: "undimensional" should be "unidimensional"
- p. 35, line 9: the word "her" should be inserted before "children"
- p. 41, line 13: "a individual" should read "an individual"
- p. 46, line 6: "a" should be inserted before "friend's"
- p. 53, line 10: "hem" should be spelt "them"
- p. 63, line 10: the word "a" should be inserted before "few"
- p. 71, line 21: "concern and" should read "concern with, and"
- p. 85, line 21: "live the way" should be living the way"
- p.92, line 6/7: "Hate feelings" should be "Feelings of hate"
- p. 96, line 25: "other people" should be "some people"
- p. 101, line 7: "a" should be inserted before "daily"
- p. 103, line 8: the word "the" should be inserted before "better"
- p. 103, line 29: "by another should read "to another"

easier to discuss personal issues in groups that consist of women only. A group can either be conducted by a group therapist who has knowledge in the field of HIV/AIDS in a form of group therapy, or a lay person can be trained to run such a group. The primary aim of such a group will be to provide these women with a supportive environment.

Psychotherapy and counselling on an individual level appears to be significant according to the results of the study. The women in this study indicated that they received counselling which helped them to change their initial views on HIV and what to do when you want to live with the virus for longer. It is therefore important for the therapist or the counsellor to be knowledgeable about HIV/AIDS to be able to give valuable information on the subject.

More effort should be placed on preventative measures. The growing rate of infection despite education efforts on the use of condoms and abstinence indicates that something more needs to be done. Provision of female condoms at a reasonable price should be considered in order to give women more control of the situation during sexual intercourse. Education efforts should also be specifically directed to men since they are the ones who can help by taking responsibility for their and other people's lives by making sure that they use condoms.

Although there is some evidence of side effects of the anti-retroviral drugs like AZT, most researchers still believe that they can be useful, especially in reducing the risk of transmission from mother to child in case of pregnant women (Gregson *et al.*, 1998). With the thirteenth International AIDS Conference held in South Africa, the debate around the use of retroviral drugs in the treatment of AIDS will hopefully go a long way towards persuading the government to provide these drugs to pregnant women and rape victims. Resolutions and conclusions reached at this conference will hopefully also help to combat HIV/AIDS.