The Power of Pampering

A clinic uses massage to communicate about HIV health.

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In a Nashville HIV clinic, people waiting to see the doctor don't sit in isolated silence, thumbing through magazines. Instead, they relax in a salon getting their nails done and their hands and arms massaged—in a word, they get manicated.

Say what? Manication is a 2-year-old program initiated by Nashville CARES to help positive people bone up on HIV and learn to live safer, healthier lives with the virus. Taking the idea of doing HIV education in beauty salons and barbershops a step further, the program employs de-stressing massage along with manicure to encourage talk and education.

"When a person comes in who is newly diagnosed, they are going through trauma," says Dennis Davis, an HIV-positive peer educator who trained in a six-week course to work in the salon. "So they don't know much about the disease." They are tense and shut down, he says, adding, "I use manication to comfort them and help them accept their status."

The stress of going to the doctor and thinking about HIV can work against health education. "If you are uncomfortable," Davis says, "you can't open up and talk to me." And if you're too tense to talk, you can't learn—not to mention the well-documented damage stress can do to your immune system.

Davis, who is 53, begins by massaging fingers, hands and forearms (up to the elbows), while helping clients learn how to protect their partners from contracting the virus and how to maintain their own health. "I tell them, 'Know your [CD4 counts] and viral load. Your [CD4s] should be high, viral load low.'" Davis says the main question—the surprising lesson—is about which body fluids can transmit the virus. "People think it's contagious through saliva," he says. He sets the record straight (it's not) and teaches about condom use.

While delivering information and massage, Davis also inspires. "I tell them, 'If you take care of yourself, stay stress-free and take your medication religiously, your health will improve. You will be okay.'"

He knows something about this. "When I tested HIV positive in 2001," Davis says, "I had to go through a heck of a transition to accept my status. Once I accepted it, I decided to help others."

And thus a manicationist was born.

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