Motivating At-Risk Youth to Make the Best Decisions in Health and HIV

Project SWERVE was developed for sexual and gender minority youth who use alcohol, tobacco and/or drugs.

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Can a brief motivational counseling session increase the frequency of HIV testing, reduce substance use and help link people with HIV to care and treatment? That's the goal of Project SWERVE, an intervention being tested among sexual and gender minority youth (SGMY) in Southeast Michigan.

Funded by the National Institute on Drug Abuse, SWERVE integrates substance use counseling with standard HIV testing and counseling for SGMY in Southeast Michigan who currently use alcohol, tobacco and/or drugs. The project was created by the Center for Sexuality & Health Disparities, based at the School of Nursing at the University of Michigan and operated in collaboration with the University of Pennsylvania's School of Nursing.

According to a Project SWERVE press release, the program was developed in response to the unique needs of SGMY in Southeast Michigan. Specifically, these youths have higher than average rates of substance abuse (a known risk factor for HIV). They're also less likely to get tested and to engage in care and treatment if HIV positive. Unsurprisingly, the center has reported low rates of HIV testing and high rates of infection among SGMY in the area.

"SWERVE is founded on principles of motivational interviewing, which has a strong evidence base of proven effectiveness for positive change," said Jose Bauermeister, PhD, MPH, of the University of Pennsylvania and a principal investigator of Project SWERVE. "That, coupled with the ease with which SWERVE can be incorporated into standard HIV testing and counseling, makes it a potentially very impactful, and, no doubt, cost-effective intervention."

Rob Stephenson, a professor of nursing at the University of Michigan, and the other lead investigators of SWERVE believe that the program offers a promising solution.

"This is a resilient population of young people," Stephenson added in the press release. "SWERVE will tap into that strength to help them make the best decisions for their situation and their health."

If effective, the intervention will be offered at AIDS service organizations and other agencies as an efficient, cost-effective way to engage SGMY across the nation in HIV prevention and treatment.

To learn more about Project SWERVE and to determine whether you're eligible to participate, click here.

And to read more about the intersection of youth and HIV in POZ magazine, click #Youth.

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