



How Three Friends Came Together to Help Men Living with HIV

Adam, Keith, and Sabina have launched a project to study whether a mobile health app can help men living with HIV manage their medical treatment and improve their mood.

September 14, 2023 By Dr. Sabina Hirshfield, Dr. Keith Horvath and Dr. Adam Carrico

Taking HIV medications as prescribed, sometimes called medication adherence, has been shown to improve the health of people living with HIV. However, many daily struggles can impact one's ability to regularly take their medications, including depression and the use of substances. As a result, there is a need for research studies that empower men living with HIV who use substances to improve their medication adherence.

In 2017, three researchers (Adam, Keith, and Sabina) started planning a grant together to merge their expertise. Their goal was to help men living with HIV manage their medication and practice mindfulness to improve their mood. It took two years before they were funded - \$2.7 million from the National Institutes of Health. Their plan to build a health app for 350 men living with HIV around the U.S. has become a reality.

Adam, Keith, and Sabina have launched a project to study whether a mobile health app can help men living with HIV manage their medical treatment and improve their mood. The study is called Supporting Treatment Adherence for Resilience and Thriving (START). Below, the team shares their reasons for developing START.

About the START study

Once enrolled in the START study, some participants will receive access to the app, which features tools to encourage medication adherence, activities to improve mood, and information related to health. Other participants will receive access to an online national resource site. However, everyone in the study will have access to resources recommended by community members that may help participants navigate their daily lives. [Click here](#) to see an intro video about the study.

How to get STARTed

Below is a link to a brief online study screener. If you are eligible for the study, a START team member will contact you to schedule a virtual visit. They will tell you more about the study, explain how your information is protected, and what rights you have as a study participant.

If you have had your virtual visit, you will learn about the types of study activities involved with START. Everything is remote! Activities include completing online surveys and providing a dried blood specimen a few times during the study. You will be paid for all study activities you fully complete.

By participating in START, you are helping us learn more about health outcomes related to HIV. Men from all over the U.S. are currently participating. The study may seem long (one year!), but we only check in with you every 3 months for an activity.

START is actively recruiting. To see if you are eligible, [complete the study screener here](#).

Whatever goals you have, we hope that there are skills here in START that are useful as you move forward with them. Your participation in START is critical, and we are thankful for your consideration.

About the researchers

Dr. Adam Carrico, at Florida International University, believes that “every journey has a start, and we view it as is our job to help you meet whatever goals you come to the study with, whether it be living a happier and more fulfilling life, staying on track with your medications and HIV treatment, or even changing your relationship with stimulants.”

Dr. Keith Horvath, at San Diego State University, agrees that “medical advances in HIV treatment work so well that if you take HIV medications as prescribed, you cannot transmit HIV.” But his concerns stem around stigma: “We have come so far and have a better understanding of how stigma and mental health challenges continue to impact members of our community.” Keith hopes START will help “break down both stigma and address some of the mental health challenges faced by the community.”

Dr. Sabina Hirshfield, at SUNY Downstate Health Sciences University, is a national advisory board member at POZ and has been a POZ collaborator since 2010. Sabina began conducting online research in 2001 because of 9/11 when she and colleagues became concerned about the health and well-being of gay and bisexual men who lost someone in the attacks. Sabina hadn’t done research with sexual minority men but had researched health outcomes. She and colleagues scrambled to create an online survey they posted on Gay.com. They made the survey anonymous so that men would feel comfortable sharing personal information, like sexual experiences, drug use, mental health, and HIV status. They didn’t think many would click on the study banner ad, but to her surprise, thousands of men completed the survey – way more than she had anticipated. Sabina learned that men who lost someone reported more alcohol use and sex partners than before the attacks. People were looking to connect and forget. It was then that she realized her calling was in men’s health and online research.

From left: Drs. Sabina Hirshfield, Adam Carrico, and Keith Horvath

[Click here](#) to learn more about Adam, Keith, and Sabina's research.

For now, only study participants can access the app or online resources. We hope to learn what participants like and what is helpful for their daily lives to develop an app that can be used outside of a study setting.

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