

WOMEN'S PERCEPTIONS OF FACING HIV

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Background: Despite dramatic reductions in human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) transmission in the United States (US), many women of childbearing age who are at risk for HIV or are HIV positive struggle to maintain health and quality of life. Many of these women encounter social, cultural, economic, and systematic barriers to care, and, regrettably, health care providers who demonstrate insensitivity and non-professional behaviors.

Purpose: In 2002, a project was funded to uncover the client-level and systematic barriers to HIV testing and care for pregnant women and women of childbearing age who live in east Texas, US. The purpose of this second phase of the study was to discover, describe and analyze the experiences of HIV positive or at risk women of childbearing age who received care in these areas.

Methodology: The data for this interpretive phenomenological study were collected during one key informant and eight focus group interviews. Sixty-six women volunteered to participate. Audio taped interviews were transcribed verbatim, and the resultant texts were analyzed hermeneutically as outlined by Diekelmann and Allen (1989). Methodological rigor was approached through adherence to the trustworthiness criteria of Guba and Lincoln (1989).

Findings: Three constitutive patterns and several themes emerged from the data. Patterns and themes illuminated the commonalities experienced by participants and included perceptions of living with the stigma of HIV, struggling to stay healthy, and getting by, "day-by-day." Common barriers to receiving holistic care included lack of confidentiality, fear of the unknown, and non-caring health care providers.

Conclusions: Findings from this study revealed ways in which nurses may enhance their understanding of the lived experiences of women who are positive or at risk for HIV. Strategies designed to diminish systematic barriers to care, and to inform caring, holistic nursing practices are also discussed.

