



UNAIDS survey aligns with so-called fourth 90 for HIV/AIDS

The survey echoes a trend in the community to take notice of mental wellness when thinking of public health interventions to fight HIV/AIDS. Paul Webster reports.



Reuters/Ajay Verma

Advocates for a so-called fourth 90 to add mental wellbeing to UNAIDS's three-pronged 90–90–90 targets for global HIV control—ie, 90% diagnosis of HIV, 90% treatment, and 90% viral suppression—are praising UNAIDS for probing mental wellbeing within a major new international lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, and intersex (LGBTI) survey.

The call to add 90% mental wellness as a fourth 90 target in HIV care first came from a group of researchers led by Jeffrey Lazarus, head of the health systems research group at The Barcelona Institute for Global Health.

"We propose adding a fourth 90 to the testing and treatment target: ensure that 90% of people with viral load suppression have good health-related quality of life", Lazarus and coauthors suggested in a 2016 paper, "to take into account the needs of those who have achieved viral suppression but still must contend with other intense challenges such as serious non-communicable diseases, depression, anxiety, financial stress, and experiences of or apprehension about HIV-related discrimination." Lazarus says the decision by UNAIDS to probe these exact issues in its new survey "aligns well" with his fourth 90 call. "Next, I'd like to see a similar approach implemented into other UN surveys", Lazarus says.

The new UNAIDS 82-question online survey was developed in collaboration with researchers at Aix-Marseille University, the University of Minnesota, and the Manchester, UK-based LGBT Foundation, says Erik Lamontagne, senior impact adviser at UNAIDS.

To probe respondents' mental wellness, the survey canvasses variables including so-called outness, family support, sexual satisfaction, physical health, happiness, self-esteem, and the internalisation of homophobia,

Lamontagne explains. "We are the first to look closely at all of these factors, and to try to correlate happiness, or wellness, to risk-taking behaviours that drive health problems such as HIV infection. We are looking in the same directions suggested in the calls for a fourth 90, but not just for those people living with HIV."

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Early response to the survey has been strong, says Lamontagne, with 37 000 respondents completing the questionnaire in the first weeks after it was published online, 11% of whom are living with HIV. "We are trying to learn more about conditions for LGBTI people in places where we really know little about their communities, including Iran, Turkey, Myanmar, Vietnam, and many places in Africa", he adds. So far, the survey has been published in 18 languages, with four more translations currently in progress, including Malay and simplified Chinese.

Sean Howell, CEO of the LGBT Foundation, says his group is providing access to its network of 25 million social media members worldwide. "I see this survey as a crucial effort to much more deeply understand how LGBTI people live worldwide", Howell explains. "Learning more about their quality of life and mental wellness is critically important to helping to improve their overall health."

The push to probe wellness is rooted in decades of research into so-called positive psychology factors, explains

Peter Smith, senior scientist at the Institute for Work & Health at the University of Toronto. Smith points to a pioneering 2005 study exploring axioms of comprehensive mental health by Emory University psychologist Cory Keyes, which proposed a 13-point categorisation of flourishing that highlighted factors such as happiness, community belonging, and a sense of purpose. "We know from longitudinal studies that people who are happier tend to live longer", says Smith, "and there's likely a relationship between happiness and safe behaviour."

Steve Dubois, a psychology professor at the Illinois Institute of Technology in Chicago who has probed linkages between lesbian and gay partnership relationships and physical and mental health, health behaviours, and health-care use, says the UNAIDS survey "absolutely is consistent with the direction proposed by the fourth 90 advocates".

"The wellbeing focus facilitates finding empirical associations between health behaviours and health more broadly, so we can situate health behaviours in the greater context of health, for LGBTQ+ individuals", Dubois adds. "Assessing these constructs simultaneously helps researchers test and find links between wellbeing and related variables."

Dubois and Lamontagne both note that although existing surveys such as the European MSM Internet Survey, the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System, and the National Institutes of Health National Epidemiologic Survey on Alcohol and Related Conditions offer some useful national and regional insights into some aspects of LGBTI quality of life, the data they provide is scattershot.

Paul Webster