

From Stigma to Strength: The Transformative Power of Activism for Former Injecting Drug Users with HIV

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Abstract

Former injection drug users living with HIV face double stigma that affects their recovery and social reintegration. This study shows that involvement in HIV/AIDS activism is not only a way to help others but also a self-healing mechanism. Activism strengthens self-esteem, a sense of community, and hope for the future. These findings highlight the importance of integrating activism into rehabilitation and harm reduction programs to support sustainable recovery.

Background

- People living with HIV (PLHIV) who are former injection drug users face **double stigma** (HIV status + drug use history).
- Stigma affects their **mental health, recovery motivation, and social reintegration**.
- **Activism** in HIV/AIDS is a pathway for **self-healing and resilience building**.

Objective

To explore how activism helps PLHIV who are former IDUs to:

- Find **life meaning**
- Build a **new identity**
- Gain **sustainable social support**

Method

This study employed a qualitative approach using in-depth interviews with people who use drugs with HIV. A total of 3 participants were recruited through **community-based organizations** in Bandung. Interviews focused on experiences with substance use, perceived risks, and coping strategies. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis

Result

- Activism acts as a **self-healing mechanism**.
- Increases **self-esteem, sense of belonging, and hope for the future**.
- **Family and community support** strengthen motivation to stay active and avoid relapse.
- Activism functions as a **social support intervention** that enhances psychosocial well-being.

"Whenever I want to give up, the community reminds me that I'm not alone" - Participant

Discussion

This study highlights the transformative role of activism for PLHIV who are former injection drug users. By engaging in activism, participants not only help others but also find a pathway to heal themselves from internalized stigma. Activism provides a safe space for identity reconstruction, emotional resilience, and long-term recovery. Importantly, family and community support enhance participants' motivation to remain drug-free, showing that recovery is not an individual process but a collective one. These findings suggest that integrating activism into rehabilitation and harm reduction programs could serve as an effective psychosocial intervention that prevents relapse and sustains recovery.

Conclusion

- Activism acts as a pathway of self-transformation for PLHIV who are former IDUs.
- It strengthens self-esteem, resilience, and social belonging, while reducing relapse risk.
- Family and peer support are key drivers of sustained recovery.
- Integrating activism into rehabilitation and harm reduction programs offers a promising strategy for long-term recovery and social reintegration.

Reference

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