It’s HIV Prevention Party Time

Healthy Love Workshops make some noise.

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A group of giggling girlfriends call each other by their “sexy names,” chat about oral sex and fiercely compete to be the first to put a condom on a penis model correctly. Despite the fun and games, this isn’t a bridal shower or sorority tea. It’s a Healthy Love Workshop (HLW), an HIV intervention geared toward African-American women.

“We work with groups of women who already know each other to build a certain comfort level,” says Dázon Dixon Diallo, founder of SisterLove Inc., the Atlanta community-based organization that has been developing these parties since the group’s birth in 1989.

Recently, SisterLove and the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) put Healthy Love to the test in a study. They found that, three months after attending a one-time, three- to four-hour HLW session, women reported higher rates of condom use and HIV testing than their peers who attended the more traditional, less interactive “HIV 101” workshop.

The study suggests that HLW works because the parties build on the support of a friendship group to encourage positive attitudes and proper condom use. Instead of asking women to come to a workshop, SisterLove goes to wherever the women normally meet—including sororities and private homes.

The CDC is convening HLW parties in other cities. If outcomes match those from Atlanta, the CDC could approve HLW as an evidence-based prevention technique.

The parties, says Mehret Mandefro, MD, a physician and HIV prevention researcher, “show HIV prevention doesn’t have to be complicated. A one-off intervention is practical because it fits in people’s lives.”

Still, Mandefro emphasizes that we won’t make a real dent in HIV prevention for women without addressing domestic violence and abuse head on. One in four women have experienced such violence, curtailing their ability to demand safer sex. To definitively stop HIV’s spread among women, she says, “we need a real movement to address violence.”

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