

the pleasure project

Pleasure + Prevention Case Study #1:

- Pleasure work with religious groups
- Pleasure-focused couples counseling
- Opening up dialogue about sex and pleasure

Location 14 countries in Africa; the examples in this case study come from work done in nine provinces in Mozambique

Project *Empowerment Concepts – train-the-trainer programmes*

David Patient and Neil Orr of Empowerment Concepts have created a process of empowerment and social change that helps organizations build capacity in confronting the AIDS pandemic. Their training programme was designed to provide an extensive range of adaptable information and training tools to organizations so that they can conduct training and support interventions in their communities. In Mozambique, the training programme was called Vida Positiva (Positive Living) and was conducted under the auspices of the National AIDS Council (Conselho Nacional de Combate ao SIDA) of Mozambique.

The programme targeted the ‘gatekeepers’ of communities, including:

- traditional leaders
- healers
- non-governmental organizations
- government agencies
- private sector actors
- and church officials

Background

One of the aims of the Vida Positiva programme was to promote safer sex among couples by tackling the primary reasons that married men said they were having sex outside of their marriages: because they were bored with their sex lives at home, which generally included one or perhaps two positions at most. When asked if they would like better and more diverse sex at home and if this would change their behaviour with regard to extra-marital sex, many men said yes.

When the wives were asked why they refuse to have sex other than in the standard position, their response was ‘I am never asked what I like in sex, if I like sex and if I even want sex, so why should I do anything that gives him pleasure? He doesn’t care about me and my sexual needs, so I will simply lie there and let him do his business. If he wants pleasure, then he must use a working girl.’

Often, when a man asks his wife to have sex in anything but the standard missionary position, she accuses him of treating her like a sex worker and is offended. Family and community members may view this as a sign of disrespect. So the man justifies having sex outside his marriage by saying ‘I want better sex with my wife, but she won’t let me have it.’

Through the Vida Positiva programme, the question was raised: what if we use the structure of religion to teach people in committed relationships how to have better sex? What if religion started taking an active role in human sexuality and relationship-building through educated intimacy? The best sex is dependent upon a disciplined effort to communicate and learn about your sexual partner, and this is something that religious institutions could begin to facilitate.

To address this problem head-on, Vida Positiva trainers advocated for local churches – including Catholic churches – to teach couples better sex by getting both partners to talk openly about what they like and do not like about sex. “Make sex amazing within the relationship,” they reasoned, “and men will not stray as much.” Thus, the number of sex partners can be reduced – a primary means of lowering STI/HIV transmission.

In a nutshell, religion, by and large, has made sex the problem. The Vida Positiva programme suggested that religion could use sex as the possible solution.

How this project put pleasure first

The Vida Positiva programme embraced the notion that ‘good sex is safer sex’. Among the men, more pleasurable sex with their wives was used as the primary motivator to practice safer sex (i.e. with fewer partners). Among the women, telling their partner what they liked and didn’t like sexually and in other aspects of their relationships enabled them to improve communication with their partners in pursuit of getting more sexual and overall pleasure in their relationships.

The Pleasure Approach: tools and techniques

1. Work with spiritual/religious institutions to encourage sex-positive couples counseling.

Vida Positiva trainers explained to church-affiliated participants the importance of talking more openly about sex and helped them understand that open dialogue among married couples about sex and pleasure is not a threat to culture, religion or people’s sensibilities. Also, they emphasized that, in fact, it is the moral obligation of the church to facilitate this process since marriage -- which most religions promote -- is putting people (especially women) at increased risk of contracting HIV.

Here are some of the arguments that Vida Positiva trainers put forth to church representatives in order to convince them to take on pleasure-focused couples counseling:

- All mainstream religions strongly discourage infidelity, but to pretend that committed relationships will endure through simple ‘thou shalt not’ proscriptions is an illusion. Moreover, in a time when marriage can increase a woman’s risk of contracting HIV, it is a deadly illusion.
- Trainers encouraged religious organizations in Mozambique to update their commitments to protecting the sanctity of marriage and get more involved in the mechanics of the process. They emphasized that married people need help, and they need it from people they trust.
- Religious representatives were asked to imagine the following scenario:
 - A young couple approaches their families to inform them that they are in love and intend to marry.

- The family make an appointment with the minister/priest of their religion and, over the next six months – individually at first, and then later as a couple – the two are given instructions in the art of relationships, trust, communication and sex. They do not have sex until they get married.
- The couple discuss love, love-making, fears, pleasures, children, their future, and a range of issues that create an intimate bond of understanding and trust.
- During the first few months of marriage, the instruction continues, with exercises to enhance sexual experiences and to consolidate trust and communications. Breathing and muscle control exercises are included to prolong orgasm and they are given information about the difference between orgasm and ejaculation and a range of other issues that ensures that the sexual experience between the husband and wife is of such a nature that sex outside of marriage becomes unthinkable.

In addition to presenting convincing arguments to spiritual/religious representatives, Vida Positiva trainers also worked to increase their knowledge of and comfort with sexual topics and information. One exercise was a ‘build your own dildo competition’ which required all participants to create a dildo for condom demo purposes out of a variety of materials. The Catholic nuns won the competition hands-down!

Overall, Patient and Orr say that putting HIV, gender and equity issues into a context that church representatives can understand and introducing topics related to people’s sex lives in a non-threatening were the first steps to enabling these non-sexually-active people to address issues of sex.

2. Open up dialogue about what partners like and do not like sexually.

This was done in a variety of ways. One exercise was role-switching: husbands and wives switched roles for an entire weekend and the women acted like the men and vice-versa. At one session, the women (acting as the men) said what didn’t work for them about their husbands. They addressed this to a ‘penis’ at the front of the room, with the men (playing their wives) sitting at their feet. Some women slapped the penis or flicked it. It was a powerful, provocative and humorous learning method through which the wives were able to vent their feelings, some for the very first time!

The men, on the other hand, were shocked at how they were viewed by women. This was a valuable lesson for men to finally hear – from women – how they are perceived...smelly, demanding, selfish, egomaniacal, etc. The women’s clearing process was painful and liberating for most of the participants. At first, the men were not as open to the idea of discussing what they like and do not like openly; but after a time they also opened up.

Outcomes

At first, both church-affiliated participants and the couples were reserved. But once the Vida Positiva leaders established trust with them most participants, with the exception of only a few, opened up and participated. They did this by using several fun, high-energy games that included music and lots of laughter. The participants usually had so much

fun and got caught up in the games that even talking about taboo subjects like sex was possible.

Lessons-learned

- According to David Patient: “Don’t believe for a moment that you can’t get people to talk openly about sex – that is a myth! There are methods and techniques that make anything possible, if not probable. We have used them all around Africa and they have never not worked.” However, says Patient, the methods and techniques that get people talking about sex are part of a process – not one-off exercises or isolated events. “We build relationships based on trust and respect and it is within this context that we are able to get people to open up about stuff they would never talk about normally. We suggest that anyone interested in our approach contact us so we can share what we’ve learned.”
- “When things are placed into a non-threatening context, it’s amazing what people will do and how they step out of cultural and politically-correct roles and get down and dirty.” –David Patient, Empowerment Concepts
- Not only did the Vida Positiva trainers get people talking about sex in Mozambique, they inspired churches to such a degree that the local Catholic Bishop now does the ‘blessing of the condoms’ as a regular Sunday night feature. Even the crucifix in the church is made up of unopened condom packages. According to the Bishop, he has to follow what he knows is right and if God gets upset with him, he will take it up with God when he’s in Heaven.
- The Vida Positiva programme also had strong support from the government in Mozambique, which Patient and Orr say was vital to its success. They got this support by showing government officials research and actuarial analyses that proved that introducing five of the 25 recommended suggestion in Vida Positiva could extend the productive life of HIV positive people by as much as 4.4 years before the need for anti-retrovirals. President Cissano himself endorsed the program at an extraordinary session of the Parliament.

Questions for Discussion

1. Name some ways that opening up dialogue among couples about sex and pleasure (likes and dislikes) can encourage safer sex.
2. Have you ever worked with couples in your prevention activities? Would you consider doing so and how? Why or why not?
3. What are some of the benefits of working with spiritual or religious organizations to encourage open dialogue about sex? What could some of the major challenges or resistance be in your community or country? How could you overcome these if you decided that spiritual/religious institutions might be good partners for prevention in your community?
4. What elements of Vida Positiva’s project could you use in your own work?

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