

Disclosure Strategies, Comfort with Disclosure, and HIV Transmission Risk among HIV-positive MSM

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+ Background

Men who have sex with men (MSM) remain disproportionately represented in national HIV/AIDS statistics. Non-disclosure of an HIV-positive status to casual sex partners, now a felony in many states, may be a key factor responsible for male-to-male HIV transmission. Little progress, however, has been made in understanding the role of disclosure in HIV transmission. Using data from a randomized-controlled trial (RCT) of an intervention designed to address disclosure, this study examined strategies for disclosure, comfort levels for disclosing, and positive/negative aspects of disclosure experiences which might affect the sexual behaviors of MSM.

+ Participants

Participants were 155 HIV-positive adult MSM recruited from the Columbus, Ohio Metropolitan Service Area ($n = 82$; 52.9%) and the Tampa, Florida Metropolitan Service Area ($n = 73$; 47.1%). Of the 155 participants, over 92% ($n = 143$) had disclosed their status to a sexual partner.

+ Methods

Data for this study were obtained from a disclosure assessment administered prior to the first session of a 4 session disclosure intervention.

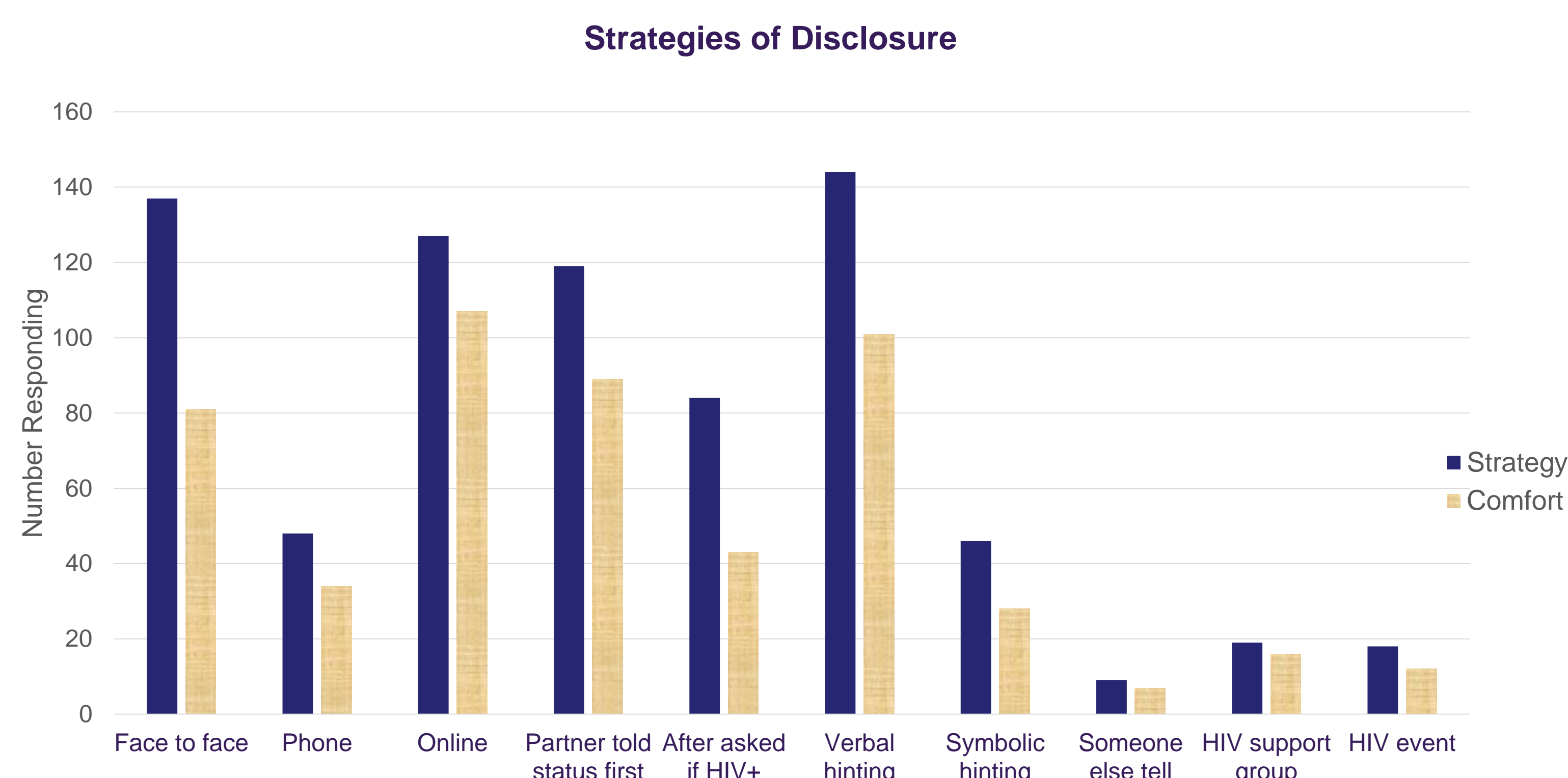
Participants were asked whether they had ever disclosed their HIV status to a sexual partner. For those that answered affirmatively, additional questions were asked whether they had used any of 16 possible disclosure strategies.

Using a 4 point Likert-type scale ranging from *Very Comfortable* (3) to *Very Uncomfortable* (0), participants were also asked their comfort level in using the stated method of disclosure.

Data were also collected about the participants' HIV transmission risk (e.g., unprotected anal intercourse), disclosure self-efficacy, outcome expectancy, social support, substance use, and HIV-related stigma.

+ Results

The chart below presents the number of participants using various HIV disclosure strategies to tell their sexual partners and those stating they were *Comfortable* or *Very Comfortable* using that strategy (multiple responses permissible).



As can be seen from this chart, **face-to-face disclosure** and **verbal hinting** were the **most common strategies** for disclosure of HIV status to sexual partners; however, comfort using these strategies was mixed. Approximately 40% of the participants reported they were *Uncomfortable* or *Very Uncomfortable* using face-to-face disclosure. This trend was also evident for participants who told a partner only after the partner asked if he was HIV-positive.

Additional analyses were conducted to determine if there was a relationship between types of disclosure strategies, comfort disclosing, and various sexual behaviors. Comfort with face-to-face disclosure was positively related to disclosure self-efficacy and outcome expectancy and negatively related to HIV-stigma.

Table 1. Significant relationships between comfort with a disclosure strategy and scale scores (t-statistics and p values reported)

Comfort with....	Self-Efficacy		Outcome Expectancy	Social Support		Outness
	Disclosure	Negotiation	Disclosure	Family	Friends	
...Face-to-face	4.09 (.00)	2.62 (.01)	3.01 (.00)	2.33 (.02)		
...Phone	2.64 (.01)		2.33 (.03)			
...Online						2.77 (.01)
...Partner told status first			2.30 (.03)		2.51 (.01)	
...After asked if HIV+	3.15 (.00)		2.14 (.04)			
...Someone else tell						
...Verbal hinting						
...Symbolic hinting						
...While at an HIV support group		2.49 (.02)				
...During an HIV related event						

Those areas shaded in purple reflect statistically significant relationships. For example, those participants who were comfortable with face-to-face disclosure had more disclosure self-efficacy than those who were uncomfortable with the face-to-face disclosure strategy.

It is worth noting, the scales in which significant relationships were evident were different for participants who were comfortable with a strategy than those who were uncomfortable with a strategy.

Table 2. Significant relationships between being uncomfortable with a disclosure strategy and scale scores (t-statistics and p values reported)

Uncomfortable with....	Disclosure Attitudes	Outcome Expectancy	Substance Use	HIV Stigma	Disclosure Regret	Sexual Compulsivity	Communication
		Negotiation					Sexual Health
...Face-to-face				3.74 (.00)			
...Phone			2.25 (.03)				
...Online						2.18 (.03)	
...Partner told status first					2.18 (.03)		2.92 (.01)
...After asked if HIV+		2.48 (.02)					
...Someone else tell							
...Verbal hinting							
...Symbolic hinting	2.13 (.04)						2.91 (.01)
...While at an HIV support group							
...During an HIV related event							2.36 (.01)

Those areas shaded in tan reflect statistically significant relationships. For example, those participants who were uncomfortable with disclosing over the phone were more likely to use substances than participants who were comfortable disclosing over the phone.

Interestingly, comfort with the following disclosure strategies were **not** statistically significantly related to any of the scales:

- Asked someone else to tell
- Verbal hinting

HIV Transmission Risk: Statistically significant correlations between comfort with disclosure strategies and HIV transmission risk (e.g., unprotected anal intercourse) were demonstrated for face-to-face, phone, and online disclosures. Participants who were less comfortable disclosing face-to-face, on the phone, or online were more likely to have unprotected anal sex with partners without disclosing.

+ Conclusions

A variety of strategies to disclose HIV status were employed by MSM, but comfort using these strategies remains relatively low. Interventions are needed to increase comfort with disclosure to sex partners, as disclosure of status is mandated by law in several states. Comfort with specific strategies may be a protective factor in MSM mental health and self-efficacy, but the means by which disclosure impacts HIV transmission risk behavior requires further study.

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