

## Couples in Context: Piloting a Couples-Based Intervention in South Africa

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### Project Description

This study will pilot a behavioral intervention program to increase HIV testing among couples living in Soweto, South Africa. Our intervention pilot will combine activities and components from previously developed theory-based interventions that have been effective in reducing risk behavior and improving skills essential for risk reduction (e.g., information, communication skills, negotiation skills, social norms). In addition, we will provide participants with an adaptation of a couples-focused intervention that has empirical evidence of effectiveness for improving relationship outcomes over time.

The proposed intervention consists of six sessions (one mixed gender group, one single gender group and four couples counseling sessions). It is hypothesized to improve communication, intimacy and trust necessary for mutual decision-making about behaviors related to sexual risk behavior and testing for HIV. Both of these outcomes are necessary and effective strategies to reduce the risk of HIV transmission within primary partnerships.

The specific aims of the project are to establish:

- Feasibility of implementing the intervention
- Satisfaction and acceptability of the content and delivery of the intervention

### Significance

Couples-based approaches to HIV prevention are necessary as couples represent one of the highest at-risk groups in sub-Saharan Africa. Couple-level interventions are more likely to recognize that partners may not always be making decisions for their own health outcomes, but rather may be focusing on improving their *relationship* outcomes. Adopting a dyadic perspective represents an innovative behavioral approach which incorporates the competing demands that couples face.

Prior interventions have also not examined predictors of participating in couples-based testing, and factors influencing sexual risk reduction have most often been examined for serodiscordant couples. As couples are particularly vulnerable for HIV infection in this context, increasing testing for HIV and reducing likelihood of behavioral transmission of HIV within partnerships would be a high-impact outcome with the potential to significantly reduce the impact of HIV in an area already severely affected by the pandemic.

**Project Recruitment Dates:** Spring 2009

**Project End Date:** November 2009