



## Healthy Love Program

SisterLove was founded in 1989 with the mission of eradicating the impact of HIV/AIDS and other reproductive health challenges on African-American women and girls, their families and communities through education, prevention, support and human rights advocacy in the United States and around the world. The Healthy Love Workshop, (HLW) – is a group-level STD/HIV prevention intervention.

### SisterLove, Inc.

SisterLove has been providing HLW since its founding in 1989 to African-American women and women of African descent in metro Atlanta, the state of Georgia and around the world. The HLW's innovation and uniqueness lies in its grassroots origins, style of delivery and the cultural sensitivity used in its design. It is a community-focused and community-responsive workshop that speaks to the realities of African-American women's lives while also providing practical and innovative preventive strategies to help Black women face, and overcome, challenges posed by the AIDS epidemic.

The HLW is an intervention that makes 'house calls;' that is to say, SisterLove's HLW facilitators typically go to locations requested by the participants and they provide the women with prevention information on their own turf. As a result, the workshops are often conducted in familiar and safe settings which make it easier to dispel racial and social identities that are sometimes subtle barriers and obstacles to practicing safer sex. Likewise, by engaging in such an interactive workshop on a personal level, participants are also more likely to make the connection with the threat of HIV/AIDS in the community as a disease that can also affect them on an individual level if preventive measures are not taken in their daily lives. Participants also personalize the safer sex message by assessing their own risk in various sexual situations. The facilitator ensures that women leave the workshop understanding the practical and daily applications of the information they receive.

The HLW creates an engaging environment in which participants have the unique chance to connect with their sexuality in a way that is positive and self-loving instead of shameful or degrading. The innovative logic of the HLW is that if women think and talk about sex and sexuality in positive ways, they will be more likely to value their bodies enough to protect themselves.

The workshop encourages participants to be confident in approaching their own sexuality and to demand safe behaviors from themselves and their partners. It also provides the opportunity for women to explore, discuss and dispel the barriers to practicing safer sex. The HLW respects the cultural traditions of African-American women who, throughout time, have gathered to support one another in times of crisis and growth.

The HLW lasts two to three hours and is delivered during a single session. It is a highly interactive workshop that aims to provide a safe environment in which African-American women can learn about:

- a) the modes of HIV transmission,
- b) effective strategies for reducing one's risk for contracting or transmitting HIV or other Sexually Transmitted Infections (STIs),
- c) opportunities to develop or enhance skills for self-assessing the risk level of sexual behaviors and the use of safer sex techniques, and
- d) how to develop an awareness of personal, community and social attitudes, beliefs and norms that influence women's relationships, sexual behavior, and decision-making.

In 2009, the HLW was evaluated by the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) as an innovative group-level HIV prevention program. The HLW was determined to be effective in: reducing risk-taking behaviors; reducing numbers of sexual partners; increasing condom use; and increasing testing with results among Black women.

The following is a brief description of the HLW intervention, which is divided into three components.

The first component, called "Setting the Tone," contains the following two exercises:

**Fantasy Name:** The goal of this exercise is to help participants relax and feel comfortable about discussing sexuality and sexual behaviors that might place them at risk for HIV infection and transmission. Participants are asked to select a sexy fantasy name by which they will be referred throughout the duration of the workshop. Participants introduce themselves by their fantasy name, which helps them feel more comfortable and facilitate discussion of sexual issues

**Synonyms:** This exercise helps women to recall and acknowledge their feelings, attitudes and beliefs about words often associated with sex and sexuality. The facilitator writes the following words at the top of a large sheet of paper: "penis," "vagina," "sex," and "masturbation." Each sheet of paper is then attached to the walls of the room and participants form groups near each sheet to brainstorm synonyms for the word, while one of them writes the synonyms on the sheet. After everyone has provided a synonym, a volunteer is asked to read the list aloud so that everyone feels the effects of hearing words that often trivialize or denigrate human sexuality, especially the sexuality of women. This is followed by a discussion, led by the facilitator who highlights the positive words in the participants' lists. The facilitator only uses these positive words for the rest of the presentation.

The second component of HLW is called "The Facts," and contains the following three exercises:

**HIV/AIDS Fundamentals:** This is the central informational component of the HLW. The facilitator writes down the acronyms "HIV" and "AIDS" on sheets of paper, and asks the participants for the meaning of each letter. This activity leads to a discussion of HIV and AIDS, and how the virus is transmitted.

**Sexually Transmitted Infections (STIs):** Participants learn the names of the most common STIs, the mode of transmission and common symptoms. The aim of this activity is to provide basic information about STIs and their impact upon those living with HIV. The activity also gives women the opportunity to share what they know about STIs.

**The Look of HIV/AIDS:** The purpose of this activity is to dispel the myth that one can visibly tell whether someone is living with HIV or AIDS and to provide information about the incidence of HIV and AIDS in the United States. Participants learn about the signs and symptoms of HIV infection and various HIV testing options. Anonymous and confidential testing and HIV statistics for women of color are discussed. Participants are then encouraged to get tested and know their status.

The third and final component is called “Safer Sex” and is comprised of the following activities:

**Risk Assessment:** This exercise provides participants with information that will help them reconsider their assumptions or beliefs regarding personal risk for contracting HIV or other STDs. Participants are taught how to rate their own risk according to their past and/or current sexual behaviors. The aim of this activity is to provide participants with an opportunity to assess their personal risk of contracting a sexually transmitted disease and HIV.

**Condom Demonstration:** In this exercise participants are taught correct condom use and disposal. Participants are then given a chance to place a condom on a penis model.

**Condom Race:** This is a fun, competitive exercise that gives participants another chance to practice correct condom use in a realistic atmosphere (e.g., lights off and music playing). The time pressure of this exercise simulates circumstances when women may need to rapidly place a condom on an impatient partner.

**Female Condom Demonstration:** Many women may have never seen a female condom and may not know how to use one. Participants learn basic facts about the female condom, and discuss its ability to reduce the risk of transmitting or contracting HIV and other STIs. This exercise provides participants with an opportunity to apply a female condom using a vagina model.

**Oral Sex:** The objective is to demonstrate how participants can reduce their risk of transmitting or contracting HIV and other STIs during oral sex. Participants learn the proper technique for engaging in safer oral sex which includes the use of dental dams or plastic wrap, “cheeking” (applying a condom orally), and the use of lubricants.

**High, Low, No Risk:** The purpose of this activity is to provide participants with a final opportunity to demonstrate what they have learned about the ways HIV and other STIs are transmitted. Participants are randomly given cards that describe risk activities (e.g., “anal sex without a condom”). They are then asked to read the card and say whether the activity is high-risk, low-risk or no-risk for contracting or transmitting HIV. Then the entire group is asked if they agree with the participant. The Facilitator guides the group in a discussion of the activity and risk level.