

# For lifetime adherence, we need to make HIV treatment something people feel good about, not just something they tolerate.

## Use of personification as a projective research technique to understand emotional associations with HIV treatment among people living with HIV

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### Background

Previous research has found that among people living with HIV (PLHIV), negative emotional associations with HIV often extend to negative emotional associations with ART.

Rather than viewing HIV as the problem and ART as the solution, many people experience ART as a trigger for feelings of shame and a marker exposing them to stigma and discrimination, which then negatively affects their motivation to start and stay on treatment.

One strategy for improving adherence may therefore be to try to shift emotional associations with ART.

We interviewed PLHIV on their experience of ART with the aim of identifying positive emotional frames that could be leveraged to inform interventions.

### Methods

Ipsos conducted in-depth interviews with a total of 62 PLHIV from Malawi (n=25), South Africa (n=21) and Zimbabwe (n=16). Participants were recruited in partnership with local PLHIV networks. We employed purposive sampling to ensure a range of experiences and perspectives.

Demographic variables included age, gender, geography, and education. Journey-based variables included time since diagnosis, current treatment status, time on treatment, and experience of a treatment interruption.

We also prioritised inclusion of pregnant women, transgender women, female sex workers, and men who have sex with men.

Moderators employed personification, a projective technique designed to elicit deeper and more meaningful responses versus standard interview questions that often prompt “rational” responses that may not reflect underlying associations. Participants were asked to imagine ART as a person and then to describe ART and the relationship they have.

### Results and discussion

Many participants responded with powerful positive imagery—ART as a parent, partner, best friend, protector, defender, healer, etc., who wants good things for me and enables me to live my life and pursue my dreams.

*He would be like a soldier that came to protect me. If I have a fight with HIV, [ART] comes in to protect me. That's how I see him. He is like my protector.*  
– Man, 45, urban, South Africa

*[ART] would have to be our angel because he has really helped us... We have been friends for a long time, but now I would say we are close to being family.* – Woman, 38, rural, South Africa

*I will put [ART] in the image of my husband as he is always by my side. He is so kind and listens to me. He just delivers hope in my life, as I am this healthy today because of him.*  
– Woman, 25-44, rural, Malawi

*ART loves me very much. Thinks about me every day. He thinks of fighting and defeating all of my enemies. He thinks of protecting me always. He wants me to be protected.* – Woman, 45-54, rural, Malawi

*ART thinks positive things about me. She wants me to be happy always. She does not want to see me sad or stressed. We hold hands and work together. We are together in all seasons, in peace and in problems.* – Woman, 45-54, urban, Malawi

*[ART] is a helper and protector. It is a helper, just like a mother and a father... I call it “The Magnifier”. It has truly magnified my life.*  
– Man, 45, urban, South Africa

*I call [ART] the healer... She only wants good things for me, and she wants me to keep living life, for me to continue. She's proud of me.* – Man, 22, rural, South Africa

*I would see [ART] as my shoulder to cry on that whenever I am ‘going through’, they are my friend who is always there and that I can rely on.*  
– Woman, 34, rural, South Africa

*We are very close. Where [ART] is, that's where I will be. It's like that close relationship between pants and belts.* – Man, 25, urban, Zimbabwe

*I see [ART] like a person who makes people, like God himself. Someone who is big like I can't even explain how big. Our relationship is like this: We are friends, and we share the same plate every day. Everywhere I go he is there. He will be guiding me.*  
– Man, 23, rural, Zimbabwe

### Conclusions

Negative emotional associations with ART can hinder linkage and adherence. At the same time, many PLHIV have been able to develop positive emotional associations that allow them to feel good about ART. Integrating this approach into programs and services may be one way to help PLHIV develop and maintain motivation to start and stay on treatment.