

Women living with HIV share their stories through photography

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Having human immunodeficiency virus (HIV), the virus that causes AIDS, can create many challenges for individuals physically, socially and emotionally. A University of Missouri researcher found that participating in photovoice, a process by which individuals document their lives by taking pictures, empowered women living with HIV to realize their strengths in the midst of their struggles.

"In essence, the photovoice process is really about people sharing their voices through images," said Michelle Teti, and assistant professor of [health sciences](#) in the MU School of Health Professions. "Many times, individuals with HIV are defined by other people when they face challenges, but this was an opportunity for the [women](#) to define themselves. They found value in being able to tell their stories and make sense of living with a serious and lifelong illness."

Women who have HIV face significant challenges because of the stigma associated with HIV and AIDS, Teti said. Many women living with HIV are poor and are members of [racial minorities](#), so many of them also experience discrimination, hunger, homelessness, and complex family lives and caregiving responsibilities, Teti said.

"When the women got the cameras in their hands, they chose to focus on their strengths – not just their challenging circumstances," Teti said.

"They were able to reflect on what they had overcome in their lives despite illness. Many women said such opportunities for reflection were few amid their other life responsibilities. The photovoice project really

enabled these women to stop, reflect and think about their HIV and their lives in new and often positive ways."

Teti and her colleagues facilitated photovoice projects for women living with HIV in three urban areas. The researchers instructed the women to take pictures to document how having HIV affected their lives. In small group settings, the women shared and discussed their images with each other. In addition, the women had opportunities to display their photos at public exhibits. Teti interviewed the women after they completed the projects to find out how photovoice had affected their lives.

"It became apparent once we talked with women that the process really helped them access their strengths, realize what they do well and acknowledge their support systems," Teti said. "Taking the pictures and capturing the images seemed to help them appreciate the present. Having something visual allowed them to concretely express their experiences while reflecting creatively. It gave them hope, made them feel stronger, and it motivated them."

Teti said she would like to continue implementing and testing photovoice as a tool for women living with HIV. She has started conducting photovoice projects with other vulnerable populations, such as individuals diagnosed with cancer or autism, who also might benefit from the photography intervention.

More information: The study, "Taking Pictures to Take Control: Photovoice as a Tool to Facilitate Empowerment among Poor and Racial/Ethnic Minority Women with HIV," was published in the *Journal of the Association of Nurses in Aids Care*.

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