A HUMAN-CENTRED CONCEPT TO TACKLE THE STIGMA OF THE HERPES SIMPLEX VIRUS

Personal Research Project
Stephanie Batliner

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Supervised by Janja Song

Abstract

The objective of this research is to develop a human-centred concept to transform the negative image of herpes into an accepted conversation topic in our society.

This study discusses the socially constructed stigma around the Herpes Simplex Virus (HSV). Herpes is a common but medically-ignored and culturally-stigmatised sexually transmitted infection (STI). The lack of understanding of the condition defines it as a taboo and fuels the shame, embarrassment and silence of those affected even though it is a health issue that involves three quarters of the population. Coping and dealing with a lifelong condition like herpes depends on effective self-management which is a challenging task especially for newly diagnosed people. Therefore, active communication is fundamental to help educate about the condition and resolve the misconceptions people have about it.

The literature review includes topics on construction and maintenance of the stigma, designing for health and the different approaches for development of destigmatising strategies. Social and human-centred design (design thinking) today play a crucial factor in improving healthcare by offering new perspectives. The human-centred strategies to tackle the stigma could be adapted for sexually transmitted diseases (STDs).

Deeper knowledge and understanding was gained by conducting four semi-structured interviews with a diverse group of people living with herpes. The six main findings deliver insights into the daily challenges of living with an STI. Common patterns and overlapping issues create starting points to recommend future action to raise awareness, provide personalised and peer support to reach acceptance around the condition. In addition, a practical storytelling approach was used to practice disclosure and find a suitable way to talk about this sensitive topic. Disclosure is a major aspect of preventing transmission and is a way to lessen mental health issues which results in better health.

Concluding, four recommendations were presented and future research areas were suggested. This practical research project prepares for innovative and impactful approaches to eliminate the stigma through education and create an open dialogue around herpes. The researcher works towards the aim of establishing groundwork for an impactful social enterprise in order to create social change and this practical research project forms the basis of this ambition.

Keywords: *Herpes, stigma, destigmatising strategies, health, design thinking, social change*

Table of Content

4 FINDINGS   35

5 CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS   46

APPENDICES   57

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Author: Stephanie Batliner / K1640358

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