BACKGROUND: HIV positive individuals taking highly active antiretroviral therapies (HAART) can experience many uncomfortable consequences. These consequences can be either physical, psychological, or a combination of both. Physical consequences may include diarrhea, nausea/vomiting, and fatigue. The psychological consequences may include depression and a threat to one's sense of self (identity). Unfortunately for some, these unintended consequences may lead to the decision to stop taking HAART.

PURPOSE: The purpose of this study was to understand the subjective experience of HIV-positive people who take HAART and the reasons for which they might consider not taking their medication, even if HAART was perceived as effective at maintaining healthy CD-4 levels.

SAMPLE: Data were collected from 39 HIV positive dyads who had volunteered to participate in an HIV communication study.

SETTING: A large, research intensive, urban University.

METHOD: Interviews were recorded and transcribed. A thematic analysis was organized using Nvivo 10 software in which 127 statements involving medication-taking beliefs were analyzed.

RESULTS: Two main categories were identified for the lived experience of our participants in relation to medication-taking beliefs. These emerging themes suggested that attributions related to taking HAART resulted in the belief of feelings of entrapment or feelings of vitality.

IMPLICATIONS: Implication of this study will help provide a better understanding for healthcare providers regarding the possible reasons why someone might decide to stop taking what are otherwise considered lifesaving medications.