Women, Mental Health, and HIV

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Together, we can change the course of the HIV epidemic…one woman at a time.

#onewomanatatime

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What is Mental Health?

- Refers to emotional, psychological, social well-being
- Affects the way people think, feel, act
- Helps determine how people handle stress, relate to others, make choices
- Good mental health is a sense of well-being, confidence, self-esteem
- Mental health problems can change how well people function at work/home
Mental Health and HIV

• For people living with HIV (PLWH), mental health problems can affect physical health; they can
  – Make it harder to take HIV medications on time
  – Make it harder to keep appointments/take advantage of support network
  – Interfere with healthy behaviors
  – Impair ability to cope with the stresses of daily life
• PLWH at higher risk to develop mood, anxiety, cognitive disorders
  – Conditions are treatable
  – *People who experience mental health problems can get better and many recover completely!!*
Being depressed:
When someone feels down, sad, blue, unhappy, hopeless

These are all *normal feelings; almost everyone* experiences them sometimes

If these feelings become overpowering, disabling, or long-lasting, they may be a sign of *depression*
What Is Depression?

• **Compared to sadness, depression is:**
  – More intense
  – Lasts longer (more than 2 weeks)
  – Interferes with your day-to-day ability to function
  – A diagnosis based on having certain # of specific symptoms
  – Not a normal part of living with HIV
  – Can cause some serious health problems

• Consult health care provider if:
  – Showing symptoms of depression (next slide)
  – Unsure if feelings you are experiencing are normal
Some Symptoms of Depression

- Changes in appetite or weight, and/or sleeping patterns
- Aches or pains for no clear reason
- Episodes of crying for no clear reason
- Feeling sadness, guilt, hopelessness, worthlessness
- Irritability; getting into arguments easily
- Lack of pleasure in activities that usually interest you
- Low sex drive
- Difficulty making decisions or concentrating
- Fatigue or loss of energy
- Thoughts of harming oneself or committing suicide

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Some Symptoms of Depression

- Not taking care of yourself in terms of grooming, dressing, and personal hygiene
- Skipping or not going to work, calling in sick
- Being very critical and down on yourself
- Not talking to or going out with friends
- Not joining your usual social activities or hobbies
- Crying or feeling like crying more often than normal
  - Often without knowing why
- Using more alcohol or other recreational drugs
  - *Sometimes substance use hides depression* (self-medicating)

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Women and Depression

Women are **2x as likely to be depressed than men** – possibly due to:

- Burden many women bear as primary caregiver
- Having less household income, education, social support
- Strong link between depression and violence against women (physical, sexual, or emotional)
Women living with HIV (WLHIV) even more likely to suffer from depression

• Getting an HIV diagnosis is life-changing; can be difficult to hear and accept; some may feel:
  – Overwhelmed, helpless, unable to cope with an HIV diagnosis
  – Afraid for future health, disclosing HIV status to friends, family

• The stigma that many women living with HIV experience may lead to social isolation and loneliness

• All these feelings are key elements of depression

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Depression in WLHIV

- Many women living with HIV experience other large life stressors that can lead to depression:
  - Racial discrimination
  - Poverty
  - Violence
  - Single parenthood
As *HIV treatments have improved*, more and more older women are living with HIV

- Growing older often involves its own life challenges that can lead to feelings of sadness or depression:
  - Chronic disease
  - Disability
  - Loss of loved ones

- One study showed that *more than 6 in 10 WLHIV ages 50 - 76 years old* suffered from depression
Depression Can Cause Serious Problems

Studies show a direct connection between depression and poorer health for those living with HIV (WLHIV) who are depressed:

- Seek HIV care less often
- Have more trouble sticking with their HIV drug regimens
- Have more rapid disease progression
- May miss drug doses, take wrong dose, or dose at wrong time
- Not taking HIV drugs regularly can lead to the development of resistance, leading CD4 count to drop and/or viral load to go up

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Getting Help Can Make a Big Difference

• One study showed risk of death cut in half for those women who contacted a mental health provider

• Important that depression be diagnosed and treated as quickly as possible to avoid serious problems
The good news is that depression is treatable

- While it is true that depression can get better on its own, this can take months or even years
- Treatment will likely shorten the time it takes to feel better and may help with adherence to HIV drugs
- Treating depression can keep you from losing a job, a relationship, or even your life

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Psychotherapy

- Various mental health professionals can provide psychotherapy
- Talking to a trained professional about what you are experiencing
- Therapist provides support, helps you understand what is troubling you
- Most psychotherapy occurs one-on-one; group therapy can also be helpful for some
- In U.S., mental health professionals who provide psychotherapy include psychologists, psychiatrists, social workers, marriage and family therapists, mental health counselors

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Antidepressant Medications

• Often prescribed for depression or anxiety
• Many antidepressant and anti-anxiety drugs can interact with some HIV drugs
  – Talk to your provider before starting any new medications
  – Generally safest type of antidepressants for use with HIV drugs is **selective serotonin re-uptake inhibitors (SSRIs):**
    • Celexa (citalopram), Lexapro (escitalopram), Luvox (fluvoxamine), Prozac (fluoxetine), Paxil (paroxetine), and Zoloft (sertraline)
  – DO NOT take St. John's Wort (popular herbal antidepressant)
    • Affects immune system; interacts with many HIV drugs

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Get Checked and Treated for Depression

• If experiencing symptoms of depression:
  – Talk to provider
  – Ask for referral to see a mental health professional
  – Can improve your health, quality of life, including adherence

• While some don’t believe in mental health care, problems or injuries require treatment, whether they are physical or mental
  – When we experience emotional difficulty, there is no need to suffer when effective treatment is available
Stress Management

• Everyone deals with a certain amount of stress

• For WLHIV, stress can become overwhelming
  – High stress can damage your immune system, cause physical/emotional illnesses
  – Research shows stress can speed up progression of HIV

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Physical Signs of Stress

- Allergies
- Change in appetite
- Back pain
- High blood pressure
- Shortness of breath
- Chest pain
- Clammy hands
- More colds than normal
- Constipation
- Diarrhea
- Dizziness
- Fatigue
- Headaches
- Racing heartbeat
- Muscle tension
- Nightmares
- Rashes
- Restlessness
- Sleeping problems
- Stomach aches
## Emotional and Behavioral Signs of Stress

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Emotional</th>
<th>Behavioral</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Anger</td>
<td>• Increasing alcohol, tobacco, drug use</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Anxiety</td>
<td>• Not tending to physical appearance</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Denial of a problem</td>
<td>• Arguing with friends or family</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Difficulty making decisions</td>
<td>• Avoiding tasks and responsibilities</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Loneliness</td>
<td>• Difficulty concentrating</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Nervousness</td>
<td>• Crying easily</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Feeling powerless</td>
<td>• Being late to work</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Feeling rejected</td>
<td>• Eating too much or not enough</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Feeling trapped</td>
<td>• Snapping at people</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Feeling unhappy for no reason</td>
<td>• Watching more TV</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Being easily upset</td>
<td>• Withdrawing from family/friends</td>
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<td>• Worrying frequently</td>
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Decreasing Stress

- While you may not be able to remove your stressors, remember that you are human and understand you need help
- Make a list of:
  - Areas in which you feel overwhelmed and need help
  - Who or what can help
  - How to get available services

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Free or low cost services that can help with stress include:

- Medical services
- Counseling/psychological help
- Child care
- Taxi rides
- Bus passes
- Acupuncture
- Yoga classes
- Community college classes
- Massage
- Support groups
- Dating services for people living with HIV
- Free computers
- Legal services
- Drug and alcohol programs
Social Support

• For all areas of mental health, it may also be helpful to seek support of other WLHIV
  – Support groups
  – Peer counseling
  – The Well Project’s online blog for women living with HIV, A Girl Like Me

• Social support from friends and family has been found to help people with HIV avoid depression, cope better
  – Friends and family can also provide emotional support

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Other Treatment

- Meditation, massage, yoga, breathing, relaxation exercises can help with mental health, depression, stress
- Acupuncture and acupressure therapies may help reduce stress, improve mood
- Mindfulness techniques may help you get back in touch with what makes life worth living
  - Some have been combined with traditional psychotherapy, shown very effective (e.g., mindfulness-based cognitive therapy)
- Good nutrition and physical activity are beneficial, no matter which treatments are chosen

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To learn more, and for links to articles featuring more details, please read the full fact sheet:

- Depression, Women, and HIV
- Stress Management

For more fact sheets and to connect to our community of women living with HIV, visit:

- www.thewellproject.org
- www.facebook.com/thewellproject
- www.twitter.com/thewellproject

Learn More!