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

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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!!*

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What Is Depression?

**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*.

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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
  – 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
- Feelings of sadness, guilt, hopelessness and/or worthlessness
- Irritability; getting into arguments easily
- Lack of pleasure in activities that usually interest you
- Low sex drive
- Difficulty making decisions or concentrating
- Changes in sleep patterns
- Fatigue or loss of energy
- Thoughts of harming oneself or committing suicide

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If you are thinking of hurting yourself or committing suicide, please tell someone immediately.

In the US, you can call 1-800-SUICIDE (1-800-784-2433) or 1-800-273-TALK (1-800-273-8255).

Or go to http://www.suicide.org/suicide-hotlines.html to find a suicide hotline near you.
The website lists US hotlines by state as well as hotlines by country (click on the "International Hotlines" link at the top of the main page).
Other Symptoms of Depression

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

Women are **2x more 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) are 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 the diagnosis
  – Afraid for future health, disclosing HIV status

• Stigma experienced by many women living with HIV may lead to social isolation and loneliness

• All these feelings are key elements of depression
• Many women living with HIV experience other *life stressors* that can lead to depression:
  – Racial discrimination
  – Gender discrimination
  – Sexual harassment
  – 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

- Depression is **not** a normal part of aging!
Depression Can Cause Serious Problems

Studies show 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, causing CD4 count to drop and/or viral load to go up
Getting Help Can Make a Big Difference

• One study showed risk of death cut in half for 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
Psychotherapy

- Mental health professional providing personal counseling, “talk therapy”
- 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
- Some antidepressant and anti-anxiety drugs can interact with certain HIV drugs
  - Talk to your provider before starting any new medications
  - **Selective serotonin re-uptake inhibitors** (SSRIs) often used with HIV drugs:
    - Class includes Prozac (fluoxetine), Zoloft (sertraline) and other drugs
    - 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

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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
- Nausea
- Rashes
- Restlessness
- Sleeping problems (e.g., nightmares)
- Stomach aches

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# Emotional and Behavioral Signs of Stress

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

• While you may not be able to remove your stressors, remember that you are human and understand that 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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Finding Help

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
- Massage
- Support groups
- Dating services for people living with HIV
- Free computers
- Employment & legal services
- Drug and alcohol programs
• 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
Other Treatments

- Meditation, journaling, massage, yoga, breathing, relaxation exercises can help with managing 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