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Women, Mental Health, and HIV

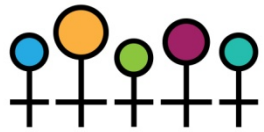
Last updated: January 7, 2022

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

#onewomanatatime

www.thewellproject.org

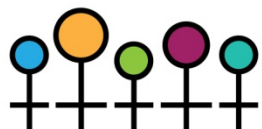
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What is Mental Health?

- 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!!***



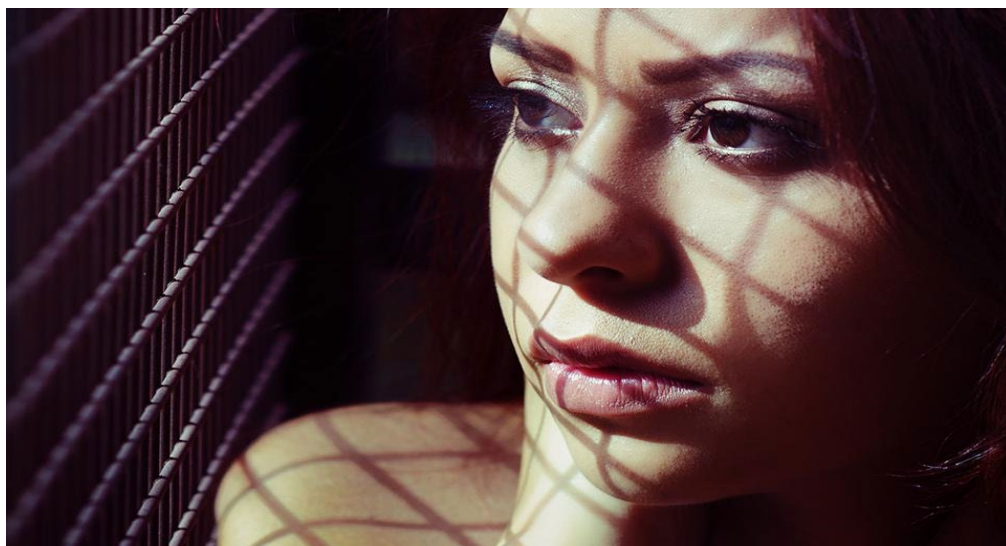
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What Is Depression?

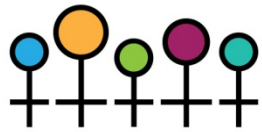
Being depressed:

When someone feels down, sad, blue, unhappy, hopeless

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



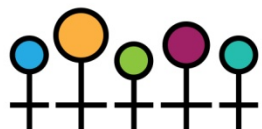
If these feelings become overpowering, disabling, or long-lasting, they may be a sign of **depression**



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What Is Depression?

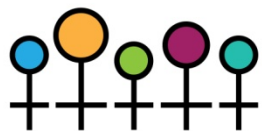
- **Compared to sadness, depression is:**
 - More intense
 - Lasts longer (more than 2 weeks)
 - Interferes with your day-to-day ability to function
 - Diagnosis based on having certain # of specific symptoms
 - Not a normal part of living with HIV
 - Can cause some serious health problems
- Consult health care provider if:
 - Showing symptoms of depression (next slide)
 - Unsure if feelings you are experiencing are normal



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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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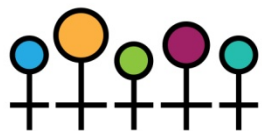
Thoughts of Suicide

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

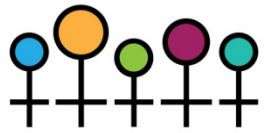
The website lists US hotlines by state as well as hotlines by country (click on the "International Hotlines" link at the top of the main page).



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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)

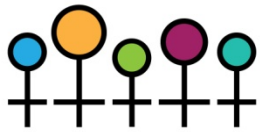


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Women and Depression

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)

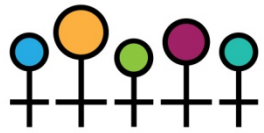


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Depression in Women Living with HIV

Women living with HIV (WLHIV) ***even more likely to suffer from depression***

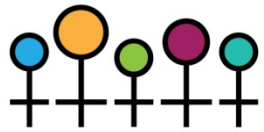
- Getting an HIV diagnosis is life-changing; can be difficult to hear and accept; some may feel:
 - Overwhelmed, helpless, unable to cope with the diagnosis
 - Afraid for future health, disclosing HIV status
- Stigma experienced by many women living with HIV may lead to social isolation and loneliness
- All these feelings are key elements of depression



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Depression in WLHIV

- Many women living with HIV experience other ***life stressors*** that can lead to depression:
 - Racial discrimination
 - Gender discrimination
 - Sexual harassment
 - Poverty
 - Violence
 - Single parenthood

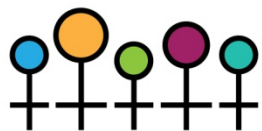


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Depression and Older WLHIV

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!



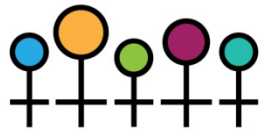
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Depression Can Cause Serious Problems

Studies show direct connection between depression and poorer health for those living with HIV

WLHIV who are depressed:

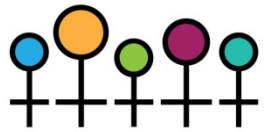
- Seek HIV care less often
- Have more trouble sticking with their HIV drug regimens
- Have more rapid disease progression
- May miss drug doses, take wrong dose, or dose at wrong time
- Not taking HIV drugs regularly can lead to the development of resistance, causing CD4 count to drop and/or viral load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



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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

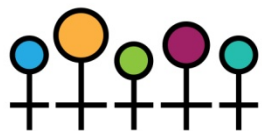


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Treatment Options

The good news is that ***depression is treatable***

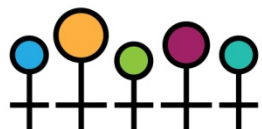
- While it is true that depression can get better on its own, this can take months or even years
- Treatment will likely shorten the time it takes to feel better and may help with adherence to HIV drugs
- Treating depression can keep you from losing a job, a relationship, or even your life



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Psychotherapy

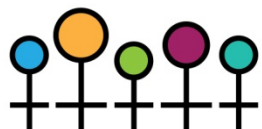
- Mental health professional providing personal counseling, “talk therapy”
- Talking to a trained professional about what you are experiencing
- Therapist provides support, helps you understand what is troubling you
- Most psychotherapy occurs one-on-one; group therapy can also be helpful for some
- 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

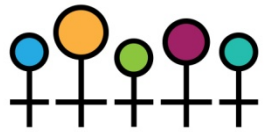
- Often prescribed for depression or anxiety
- Some antidepressant and anti-anxiety drugs can interact with certain HIV drugs
 - Talk to your provider before starting any new medications
 - **Selective serotonin re-uptake inhibitors (SSRIs)** often used with HIV drugs:
 - Class includes Prozac (fluoxetine), 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

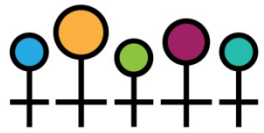
- If experiencing symptoms of depression:
 - Talk to provider
 - Ask for referral to see a mental health professional
 - Can improve your health, quality of life, including adherence
- While some don't believe in mental health care, problems or injuries require treatment, whether they are physical or mental
 - When we experience emotional difficulty, ***there is no need to suffer when effective treatment is available***



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Stress Management

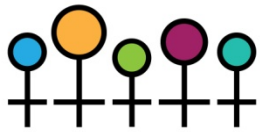
- Everyone deals with a certain amount of stress
- For WLHIV, stress can become overwhelming
 - High stress can damage your immune system, cause physical/emotional illnesses
 - Research shows stress can speed up progression of HIV



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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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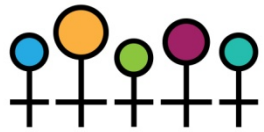
Emotional and Behavioral Signs of Stress

Emotional

- Uncontrollable anger
- Anxiety
- Loneliness
- Nervousness
- Feeling powerless
- Feeling rejected
- Feeling trapped
- Feeling unhappy for no reason
- Worrying frequently

Behavioral

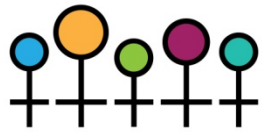
- Increasing alcohol, tobacco, drug use
- Not tending to physical appearance
- Arguing with/withdrawing from friends or family
- Avoiding tasks and responsibilities
- Difficulty concentrating
- Crying easily
- Being late to work
- Eating too much or not enough
- Watching more TV
- Difficulty making decisions



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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

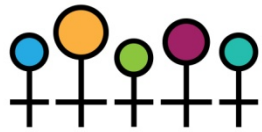


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Finding Help

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

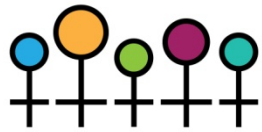
- Medical services
- Counseling/ psychological help
- Child care
- Taxi rides
- Bus passes
- Acupuncture
- Yoga classes
- Massage
- Support groups
- Dating services for people living with HIV
- Free computers
- Employment & legal services
- Drug and alcohol programs



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Social Support

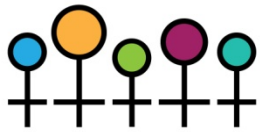
- For all areas of mental health, it may also be helpful to ***seek support of other WLHIV***
 - Support groups
 - Peer counseling
 - The Well Project's online blog for women living with HIV, *A Girl Like Me*
- Social support from friends and family has been found to help people with HIV avoid depression, cope better
 - Friends and family can also provide emotional support



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Other 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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Learn More!

- 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