Depression, Women, 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 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 interest or 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 or text 988, or 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)

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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)
- Intimate partner violence also increases risk of mental health issues in children
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
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

• HIV diagnosis may add to this burden
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 cause resistance
  - CD4 count may drop
  - Viral load may 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
The good news is that *depression is treatable*

- Treatment options: psychotherapy and/or medications
- Social support, complementary therapies
- Depression can get better on its own, but 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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• 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

• Support network can help if you get sick

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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
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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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**
Helping Others with Depression

- People with depression may not be aware of it
- Listen to loved ones, don’t try to “fix” them
- Talking to someone who may be depressed:
  - Listen!
  - Show concern
  - Tell them they are not alone
  - Don’t suggest it’s easy to cope with depression
- You may need to talk to the person repeatedly

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• Warning signs for suicide:
  – Talking about suicide, death, harming themselves
  – Expressing feelings of hopelessness or self-hate
  – Dangerous or self-destructive behavior
  – Seeking out tools for potential suicide
  – Sudden sense of calm after a depression
  – Getting affairs in order and saying goodbye to people

• If you are concerned, talk to the person as soon as possible

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Take warning signs seriously and seek help immediately.

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You may be able to find a suicide hotline in your state or country at http://www.suicide.org/suicide-hotlines.html.
Take Care of Yourself

• Don’t try to fix your loved one’s depression
  — Support them in seeking treatment

• Other ways to help:
  — Take on household tasks
  — Encourage them to join you in uplifting activities

• Make sure you take care of yourself!
  — Communicate boundaries
  — Keep up with your own life
  — Do things you enjoy
  — Have your own support team

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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

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