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# Depression, Women, and HIV

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

#onewomanatatime #thewellproject

# 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**

# 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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# Thoughts of Suicide

*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](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
- Less household income, education, social support
- Fewer freedoms and rights, gender discrimination
- 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 Women Living with HIV

- 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

# 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!

# 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

# 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

# Treatment Options

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

# 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

# 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
- Support network can help if you get sick

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# Antidepressant Medications

- Often prescribed for depression or anxiety
- Can be managed by primary care provider
  - Discuss feelings with your provider
- Some antidepressants can interact with HIV drugs
  - Talk to your provider before starting any new medications
  - **Selective serotonin re-uptake inhibitors** (SSRIs) often used with HIV drugs:
    - Includes Prozac (fluoxetine) 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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# 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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# 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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# Understanding Suicide Risk

- 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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# Seek Help Immediately

*Take warning signs seriously and **seek help 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).

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

# Supporting Your Loved One - and 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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# 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***

# Learn More!

- 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
  - @thewellprojecthiv.bsky.social
  - www.facebook.com/thewellproject
  - www.instagram.com/thewellprojecthiv/
  - www.threads.net/@thewellprojecthiv
  - www.youtube.com/thewellprojecthiv