

# HIV AND YOUR MENTAL HEALTH



## FAST FACTS

- Living with any serious illness can impact on your emotional health. People with HIV are more likely to experience mental health problems.
- There are many things you can do to take care of your mental health. Talking about how you feel can be an important first step.
- You are not alone. It may help you to hear about other people's experiences, share your own feelings or seek professional support.

If you're living with HIV, you may have been given plenty of guidance and treatment to improve your physical health but looking after your emotional and mental health is just as important.

There are many different types of mental health issues, such as depression, anxiety disorders, low self-esteem or personality disorders. They can affect anyone and everyone but living with HIV can cause additional worries that may make you more likely to experience a mental health problem.

## HIV and emotional wellbeing

It is normal to worry about illness and to experience anxiety around major life events. You may have worries that are specific to living with HIV, for example around [learning you are HIV-positive](#), [starting lifelong treatment](#) or deciding whether to [share your diagnosis](#).

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*I've learned who my true friends are, and most especially, I'm happy with the love and support that*

The information in our [living with HIV section](#) can help you with this.

You may experience stigma and discrimination from people who don't understand HIV and have negative views about it. This can be very hard to deal with, especially if it comes from people you are close to or if your relationships change as a result.

Some groups of people who are most affected by HIV (such as men who have sex with men, drug users, sex workers and transgender people) may also experience anxiety and stress as a result of being excluded from parts of society.

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*I'm getting from my friends and fellow people living with HIV. There is always a life after an HIV-positive diagnosis. - Ryan*

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*If you fight stigma and denial within yourself first, it's very easy to live a positive life. - Makena*

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## **I think I may be experiencing mental health problems, what should I look out for?**

It is quite normal to worry and have moments where you feel low. If you are experiencing mental health problems, you are likely to have these feelings persistently – most of the day and almost every day. There are many different types of mental health problems, including depression, anxiety and low self-esteem. The symptoms vary but can include any of these feelings:

- an ongoing low mood that interferes with your daily life
- feeling hopeless, ashamed or guilty
- problems sleeping
- restlessness and an inability to relax
- finding it hard to concentrate or sit still
- suicidal thoughts.

It is not unusual to feel anxious when starting treatment for HIV and, in many cases, this will pass over time, but some people experience high levels of anxiety or depression. If these are ignored they can be debilitating. It is important to be aware that some HIV drugs (including efavirenz, dolutegravir and rilpivirine) are known to have side effects that can impact on your emotional health, including sleeplessness, vivid dreams, anxiety and depression.

If you've had mental health problems in the past, it is good to tell your healthcare professional this may mean you are more likely to experience this type of side effects.

# How can I help myself feel better?

Recognising your feelings is the first step to managing your emotional wellbeing. If possible, accept that you are having a difficult time but be aware that there are many things you can do to help yourself feel better.

## Talk to family and friends

Sometimes it's hardest to talk to those you love - you might be scared of their reaction or of upsetting them. However, they could be your greatest source of help and support because they know you and can help you to feel less alone.

*"I do talk to very close friends about it - it's important to have at least one person who isn't a clinician that you can talk to because they are helpful." - Kain*

## Join a support group or talk to your peers

You may find it helpful to talk to other people with similar experiences. There are many ways you can do this, you can join a local HIV support group, an online forum or a chat group, call a helpline, or meet up with someone one-to-one. A healthcare professional can help point you in the right direction of you can get in touch with a local or national organisation supporting people living with HIV.

The fact that you don't know these people personally may help you to talk honestly about your feelings and living with HIV. They will understand your concerns and be able to offer you practical advice.

*"Family are a great support system to have through it all... but if you don't have that, there are numerous support groups that work with HIV infected persons." - Curt*

## Get professional help

Your healthcare professional isn't just there to give you treatment and check your viral load. They also need to know if you experience other problems that could affect your overall health, including emotional difficulties. Some people who experience mental health problems have trouble taking their HIV treatment correctly and may miss doses, skip appointments or not eat a healthy, balanced diet.

Your healthcare professional may suggest medication, including antidepressant drugs, or talking therapies, such as counselling or cognitive behaviour therapy (CBT).

## Exercise and stay healthy

Getting enough exercise, sleep and nutrition is important for a healthy mind, particularly for anyone who is living with HIV. Changing to a healthier lifestyle can improve how you feel physically and emotionally.

Keeping active is one of the best ways to combat mental health problems as it lifts your mood and energy levels, increases your appetite and improves your quality of sleep. Even small activities such as a walk around the park, 10 minutes of yoga or some gardening may help to relax and distract you from any negative thoughts.

Drinking too much alcohol or being dependent on recreational drugs could prevent you facing your worries and impact on the success of your treatment.

## Seek answers for your questions

Many of your worries may relate to serious concerns about your own health, for example, you may be nervous about your CD4 count or your long-term health. Getting advice and information can help you understand the full facts, what to expect and how to deal with it.

Having clear information to hand may also make it easier to share your HIV status with others and help you explain what it means to live with HIV. Sharing the facts about how treatment has now made HIV a manageable, and even untransmittable, condition can help to dispel some of the common HIV myths and assumptions that some people may have.

## Try to enjoy life

It's normal to have negative feelings and feel fearful about what the future holds. Don't be too hard on yourself, it may take time to feel better. Carry on doing the things you enjoy, like hobbies, sport or meeting up with friends.

*"I live the life of a normal teen, I have many friends, and have all the fun in the world. HIV doesn't have to limit your life." - Micha*

# HELP US HELP OTHERS

Avert.org is helping to prevent the spread of HIV and improve sexual health by giving people trusted, up-to date information.

We provide all this for FREE, but it takes time and money to keep Avert.org going.

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Every contribution helps, no matter how small.

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Last full review:

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## Sources:

Terrence Higgins Trust 'Mental health' (Accessed Jan 2020)

Aidsmap 'HIV, mental health & emotional wellbeing' (Accessed Jan 2020)

Mind (2016) 'Depression: Self-help, treatment and support' (Accessed Jan 2020)