

# Let's Talk Facts About Psychiatric Dimensions of HIV and AIDS



## What Is AIDS?

Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome (AIDS) is a disease that compromises the body's immune system, causing it to break down and rendering it unable to fight off infection. AIDS is caused by the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV). When a person is infected with HIV, the virus enters the body and lives and multiplies in the white blood cells—cells that normally protect us from disease. The HIV virus weakens the immune system, leaving the body vulnerable to infections and other illnesses, ranging from pneumonia to cancer.

There are four primary means of becoming infected with HIV: through sexual intercourse (anal or vaginal); through contact with contaminated blood and blood products, tissues, and organs; through use of contaminated needles, syringes, and other piercing instruments; and from mother to child during pregnancy or delivery. Some people fear that HIV might be transmitted in other ways, such as through air, water, or insects; however, no scientific evidence to support any of these fears has been found.

## HIV-Related Mental Health Problems

Mental health problems can strike anybody, but people with HIV are more likely to experience a range of mental health issues. Most common are feelings of acute emotional distress, depression, and anxiety, which can often accompany adverse life-events. HIV also can directly infect the brain, causing impairment to memory and thinking. In addition, some anti-HIV drugs can have mental health side effects.

### EMOTIONAL DISTRESS

Receiving an HIV diagnosis can produce strong emotional reactions. Initial feelings of shock and denial can turn to fear, guilt, anger, sadness, and a sense of hopelessness. Some people even have suicidal thoughts. It is understandable that one might feel helpless and fear illness, disability, and even death.

Support from family and friends can be very helpful at these times, as can professional help. If you are feeling emotionally distressed, it is important that you talk about your feelings. Your physician as well as knowledgeable and supportive friends and loved ones can help. Remember that any strong and lasting emotional reaction to an HIV diagnosis calls for some kind of assistance, and that there is always help through counseling.

### DEPRESSION

Depression is a serious medical condition that can be paralyzing to sufferers. It is twice as common in people with HIV as in the general population. Depression is characterized by the presence of most or all of the following symptoms: low mood, apathy, fatigue, inability to concentrate, loss of pleasure in activities, changes

# Let's Talk Facts About Psychiatric Dimensions of HIV and AIDS



in appetite and weight, trouble sleeping, low self-worth, and, possibly, thoughts of suicide. There are many different types of treatments for depression, including antidepressants and specific types of psychotherapy, or "talk" therapy. Treatment, however, must be carefully chosen by a physician or a mental health professional based on the patient's physical and mental condition.

## **ANXIETY**

Anxiety is a feeling of panic or apprehension, which is often accompanied by the physical symptoms of sweating, shortness of breath, rapid heart beat, agitation, nervousness, headaches, and panic. Anxiety can accompany depression or be seen as a disorder by itself, often caused by circumstances that result in fear, uncertainty, or insecurity.

Each HIV patient and each experience of anxiety is unique and must be treated as such. Many drugs offer effective treatment, and many alternative remedies have proven useful, either alone or in combination with medication. Among them: muscle relaxation, acupuncture, meditation, cognitive behavioral therapy, aerobic exercise, and supportive group therapy.

## **SUBSTANCE USE**

Substance use is very common among those with HIV infection. Unfortunately, substance use can trigger and often complicate mental health problems. For many, mental health problems predate substance use activity. Substance use can increase levels of distress, interfere with treatment adherence, and lead to impairment in thinking and memory. Diagnosis and treatment by a psychiatrist or other qualified physician is critical because symptoms can mimic psychiatric disorders and other mental health problems.

## **COGNITIVE DISORDERS**

Direct or indirect effects of the HIV virus can affect brain functioning. Some medications used to treat HIV infection also can cause similar complications. In people with HIV infection or AIDS, these complications can have a significant impact on daily functioning and greatly diminish quality of life. Among the most common disorders are HIV-associated minor cognitive motor disorder, HIV-1-associated dementia complex, delirium, and psychosis. Signs of trouble may include forgetfulness, confusion, attention deficits, slurred or changed speech, sudden changes in mood or behavior, difficulty walking, muscle weakness, slowed thinking, and difficulty finding words.

Signs of any of these problems should be discussed with a physician immediately. New anti-HIV therapies in combination with psychiatric medication can reverse delirium and dementia and markedly improve cognition; however, special care must be taken to ensure that the drugs do not interact with HIV medications. Psychotherapy also can help patients understand their condition and adapt to their diminished level of functioning.

# Let's Talk Facts About Psychiatric Dimensions of HIV and AIDS



## Conclusion

HIV infection and AIDS affect all aspects of a person's life. Those with HIV/AIDS must adapt to a chronic, life-threatening illness and corresponding physical and mental challenges. They often face a myriad of emotional demands such as stress, anger, grief, helplessness, depression, and cognitive disorders.

If you have concerns about your or a loved one's reaction to an HIV diagnosis, or if you have questions about the mental problems associated with HIV/AIDS, discuss them with a doctor or counselor. Treatments are available and can greatly improve quality of life.

*Because HIV infection and AIDS are associated with a number of physical, psychiatric, and psychological issues, this topic cannot be sufficiently reviewed in a brief summary. Readers are encouraged to consult a physician for further information. This summary is not intended to stand on its own as a comprehensive evaluation of HIV and AIDS.*

## Resources

For more information, please contact:

### **American Psychiatric Association (APA)**

1000 Wilson Blvd. Suite 1825

Arlington, VA 22209

703-907-7300

[www.HealthyMinds.org](http://www.HealthyMinds.org)

### **HIV InSite**

#### **UCSF Center for HIV Information**

4150 Clement Street, Box 111V

San Francisco, CA 94121

Fax: 415-379-5547

<http://hivinsite.ucsf.edu/>

### **The Body**

#### **Body Health Resources Corporation**

250 West 57th Street

New York, NY 10107

<http://thebody.com>

# Let's Talk Facts About Psychiatric Dimensions of HIV and AIDS



## National Association of People with AIDS (NAPWA)

8401 Colesville Road Suite 750

Silver Spring, MD 20910

240-247-0880

<http://napwa.org/>

## Project Inform

205 13th Street, #2001

San Francisco, CA 94103

National HIV/AIDS Treatment Infoline:

800-822-7422

<http://projectinform.org/>



## Ordering Information

Brochures may be ordered by visiting [www.appi.org](http://www.appi.org) or calling **800-368-5777**. The brochures are sold by topic in packets of 50 brochures for \$33.00 each. Discount pricing is available for bulk quantities of five or more packets. Please email [bulksales@psych.org](mailto:bulksales@psych.org) for more information.

APA physician members receive a 10% discount.

One in a series of brochures designed to reduce stigma associated with mental illnesses by promoting informed factual discussion of the disorders and their psychiatric treatments. This brochure was developed for educational purposes and does not necessarily reflect opinion or policy of the American Psychiatric Association. For more information, please visit, [www.HealthyMinds.org](http://www.HealthyMinds.org).

Created 9/06

Date of Last Revision 5/09