

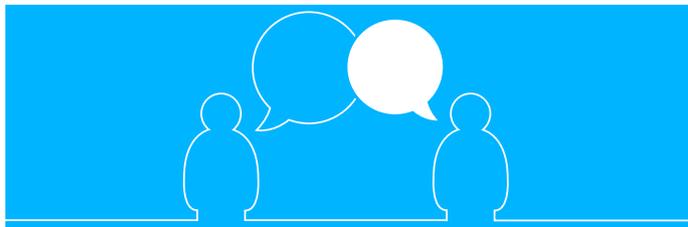
ABOUT HIV

Emotional well-being and mental health

Emotional wellbeing and mental health are important for everyone. Going through difficult times is part of life, but from time to time these can be especially hard to deal with.

Being diagnosed and living with a serious illness like HIV is likely to have a big emotional impact, as is experiencing HIV-related stigma.

While many people cope well with the stresses of HIV, research does show that people with HIV, as a group, have higher rates of mental health problems than those seen in the general population. These problems include depression and anxiety.



Dealing with problems

Talking about your experiences and feelings with a loved one, friend, or another person living with HIV can be a big help. Other people living with HIV may have faced similar difficulties to you and may offer support that a professional wouldn't be able to.

When you are finding your thoughts and feelings difficult to understand or work through, the help of a professional psychologist or counsellor can be helpful.

Feeling isolated can be a source of distress, or can make feelings of distress worse. Finding ways of interacting with other people in ways that you are comfortable with is important to good emotional wellbeing.

Taking part in productive and enjoyable activities can help promote a feeling of wellbeing. It's important to have interests that you find engaging and rewarding.

Some people find that faith or spirituality are important sources of comfort and stimulation. Prayer, meditation or quiet reflection can be helpful for reducing stress and loneliness.

Depression and anxiety

Everybody feels fed up, miserable or sad at times. These feelings don't usually last longer than a week or two, and they don't interfere too much with our lives. However when these feelings don't go away so quickly, and are so bad that they interfere with our everyday life, it's usually a good idea to get some professional help.

Doctors call this 'depression' and it is a very common problem in the general population, but people with HIV are much more likely to experience it.

If you are diagnosed with depression, your doctor may recommend that you take antidepressant drugs, which relieve the symptoms of depression by altering chemicals in the brain that influence mood and behaviour.

Another common problem is anxiety, in other words a feeling of panic or worry. Often, people report symptoms such as sweating, a rapid heartbeat or rapid breathing. Talking through your feelings of anxiety and the reasons for it with a doctor, counsellor or friend can be helpful.

Untreated HIV and mental health

When HIV hasn't been treated and the immune system is extremely weak (with a very low CD4 count) HIV can cause dementia. This can occur when someone is diagnosed very late, when he or she is already very ill. It is extremely rare in people who are taking HIV treatment.

The symptoms of HIV-related dementia can include difficulties in thinking (e.g. loss of memory, confusion), changes in behaviour (e.g. loss of interest, childishness) and problems with movement and co-ordination (e.g. loss of balance). Symptoms can be improved by taking effective HIV treatment.

HIV treatment side-effects and mental health

Some anti-HIV drugs can affect your emotional and mental health. Most notably, a drug called efavirenz can cause depression and sleeplessness, as well as vivid dreams.

Often these problems lessen or go away completely within a few weeks of starting this treatment. But if the problems persist and make life difficult, there should be other, equally effective HIV treatments you can take.

The development of www.pro-vich.info and www.about-hiv.info has been made possible thanks to generous support from Janssen. Our funder has had no editorial control over the content of either site. The information on this site is intended to support, rather than replace, consultation with a healthcare professional. Talk to your doctor or another member of your healthcare team for advice tailored to your situation.

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For more information: www.about-hiv.info; www.pro-vich.info; www.aidsmap.com

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