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Living with HIV

HIV and Mental Health

Last Reviewed: January 8, 2020

Key Points

- Mental health refers to a person's overall emotional, psychological, and social well-being. Good mental health helps people make healthy choices, reach personal goals, develop healthy relationships, and cope with stress.
- If you have HIV, it's important to take care of both your physical health and your mental health.
- People with HIV have a higher risk for some mental health conditions than people who do not have HIV.
- Mental health conditions are treatable, and people with mental health problems can recover.

What is mental health?

Mental health refers to a person's overall emotional, psychological, and social well-being. Mental health affects how people think, feel, and act. Good mental health helps people make healthy choices, reach personal goals, develop healthy relationships, and cope with stress.

Poor mental health is not the same as mental illness. Mental illnesses include many different conditions, such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), bipolar disorder, and schizophrenia. A person can have poor mental health and not have a diagnosed mental illness. Likewise, a person

with a mental illness can still enjoy mental well-being.

If you are living with HIV, it's important to take care of both your physical health and your mental health.

Are people with HIV at risk for mental health conditions?

Anyone can have mental health problems. Mental health conditions are common in the United States. According to [MentalHealth.gov](https://www.mentalhealth.gov), in 2014, about one in five American adults experienced a mental health issue.

However, people with HIV have a higher risk for some mental health conditions than people who do not have HIV. For example, people living with HIV are twice as likely to have depression as people who do not have HIV.

It's important to remember that mental health conditions are treatable and that people who have mental health problems can recover.

What can cause mental health problems?

The following factors can increase the risk of mental health problems:

- Major life changes, such as the death of a loved one or the loss of a job
- Negative life experiences, such as abuse or trauma
- Biological factors, such as genes or brain chemistry
- A family history of mental health problems

The stress of having a serious medical illness or condition, like HIV, may also negatively affect a person's mental health. HIV infection and related [opportunistic infections](#) can affect the brain and the rest of the nervous system. This may lead to changes in how a person thinks and behaves. In addition, some medicines used to treat HIV may have side effects that affect a person's mental health.

What are the warning signs of a mental health problem?

Changes in how a person feels or acts can be a warning sign of a mental health problem. For example, potential signs of depression include:

- Losing interest in activities that are usually enjoyable
- Experiencing persistent sadness or feeling empty
- Feeling anxious or stressed
- Having suicidal thoughts

If you have any signs of a mental health problem, it's important to get help.

What should I do if I need help for a mental health problem?

Talk to your health care provider about how you are feeling. Tell them if you are having any problems with drugs or alcohol.

Your health care provider will consider whether any of your HIV medicines may be affecting your mental health. They can also help you find a mental health care provider, such as a psychiatrist or therapist.

Here are additional ways to improve your mental health:

- Join a support group.
- Try meditation, yoga, or deep breathing to relax.
- Get enough sleep, eat healthy meals, and stay physically active.

To find mental health treatment services, use these resources from the [National Institute of Mental Health \(NIMH\)](#) and the [Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration](#).

This fact sheet is based on information from the following sources:

From the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention:

- [Learn About Mental Health](#)
- [Mental Health](#)

From MentalHealth.gov:

- [Mental Health Myths and Facts](#)
- [What Is Mental Health?](#)

From NIMH:

- [HIV/AIDS and Mental Health](#)

From the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs:

- [Mental Health and HIV](#)