

Looking after your mental health when living with HIV



FAST FACTS

- It's normal to have ups and downs when living with HIV.
- Being mindful of your worries, and seeking support from others, is a great way of maintaining your mental health. Remember you're not alone.
- If you think you are suffering from depression, your healthcare professional may be able to help with counselling or antidepressant drugs.

If you're living with HIV, you may have been given plenty of guidance and treatment on how to look after 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.

Here we look at ways to maintain good mental health and ways to tackle some concerns you might be facing.

I'm worried about...

Living with HIV

From [learning you are HIV-positive](#), to [starting lifelong](#)

While I no longer dwell on the past, I do have days when I feel depressed

[treatment](#) or deciding the best way to [share your diagnosis](#), you may have worries that are specific to living with HIV, which may in turn affect your mental wellbeing. We've got lots of information in our [living with HIV section](#) to help you with this.

Stigma and changing relationships

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 and/or if these relationships change as a result.

It can help to have information about HIV to hand - this way you can explain what it means to live with HIV today. 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.

Also, you may find comfort in talking to people who already understand the reality of living with HIV, such as a healthcare professional or support group.

"It's getting easier as time passes, as I can explain that I'm okay and doing well on meds." - Benoit

Antiretroviral drug side effects

As with most medication, there are some potential side effects that come with taking ARVs. Some people experience increased feelings of anxiety or depression after starting treatment for HIV, and if these are ignored they can be debilitating.

If you've had mental health problems in the past, it's helpful to tell your healthcare professional when discussing treatment options.

Don't hesitate to contact your healthcare professional if you think you're experiencing depression and that your ARV treatment may be affecting you.

How can I look after my mental health when living with HIV?

Recognising the way you're feeling is the first step to managing your emotional wellbeing when living with HIV. Here are some tips to help you manage:

Know what to look out for

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.

Don't hesitate to reach out to someone if you find that any of these feelings are overwhelming or last for longer than two weeks:

because of the whole situation. But then I look at my life and the things I have achieved, and that makes me feel better and more determined to do something with my life. - Kain

- Feeling depressed, hopeless, ashamed or guilty most of the day and almost everyday.
- Feeling constantly fatigued/tired.
- Overeating or loss of appetite and/or weight loss.
- Finding it hard to concentrate or sit still.
- Suicidal thoughts.

Your healthcare professional will be able to find you the right support for you. They might suggest you switch your ARVs or take additional antidepressants if these symptoms persist.

Talk to family and friends

Sometimes it's hardest to talk to those you love because you might be scared of their reaction or of upsetting them. However, they could be the greatest source of help and support because they already 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

Find support groups and helplines

If the support of family and friends isn't possible, you might prefer to talk about your feelings with someone at a helpline or support group - a healthcare professional can help you find one.

The fact that you don't know these people personally may help you to talk honestly about your feelings and living with HIV. In return, they can offer you practical and emotional wellbeing 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

Share your feelings with your healthcare professional

Your healthcare professional isn't just there to give you treatment and check your viral load. They also need to know if you're experiencing other difficulties that could affect your overall health, such as mental health problems.

They may suggest treatment that includes antidepressant drugs or talking therapies, such as counselling or cognitive behaviour therapy (CBT).

Exercise and staying healthy

Getting enough exercise, sleep and nutrition is important for a healthy mind and the benefits can be even more significant for anyone who is living with HIV.

Many people find that changing to a healthier lifestyle helps with some of the symptoms and enables them to get some control back in their life. Drinking too much alcohol or being dependent on drugs could also have a

Find some sort of positive support from the time you find out until the time you can rely on yourself. You are not the disease - it is a

big impact on your mental health and the success of your *part of you.* - Curt
treatment.

Don't be too hard on yourself

It's normal to have negative feelings and feel fearful about what the future holds.

Often it's about learning how to cope with feelings of uncertainty and, in many cases, this can be hard to do without the support of loved ones or a mental health professional.

"I've learnt a lot about myself since my diagnosis and how I deal with things; I've become more headstrong and I don't give up very easily." - Kain

Do things that relax and interest you

You may lack interest in activities that you used to enjoy, but keeping active is one of the best ways to break the cycle 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.

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Sources:

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