

Numerous studies have explored the relationship between mental health and HIV. There is a complex relationship between mental health and HIV/AIDS. Mental health is defined as psychological well-being and satisfactory adjustment to society and to the ordinary demands of life<sup>1</sup>. Mental health issues can include depression, anxiety, low self-esteem, schizophrenia, sleep disorders, organic mental disorders, post-traumatic stress disorders, and mood disorders.

Research has highlighted that the correlation between HIV/AIDS and mental health can be seen in three categories: (1) individuals with mental health issues may be at a greater risk to contract HIV<sup>2</sup>; (2) person living with HIV is more likely to experience mental health concerns due to the stigmatized nature of the infection and possible isolation<sup>3</sup>; (3) mental health issues can arise as HIV related mental disorders such as organic dementia or mania<sup>4</sup>.

### **Mental Health and the risk for HIV**

Individuals experiencing low-self esteem, anxiety, depression, schizophrenia, or other mental health issues may lack the capacity to make safer-sex decisions to protect them from HIV or other STI's (sexually transmitted infections). This may happen as a direct result from the mental health issues, or from substance use or misuse as a form of self medicating, and that may lead to an increase in high risk activities<sup>5</sup>. A key ingredient in condom use negotiation with potential partners is good self-esteem and clear judgment, studies have shown that individuals who lack the concept of self-worth will be more likely to engage in unprotected sex. Thus, traditional intervention and safer-sex education may not be effective for all populations since people with lower self-esteem may not be able to communicate or insist on condom use. This can also be said about individuals experiencing severe mental health issues, whom may not have the mental capacity to choose harm reduction strategies such as utilizing a needle exchange program, or consistent condom use<sup>3</sup>.

### **Risk of Mental Health Issues in People Living with HIV/AIDS**

In the words of former director Jonathan Mann of the World Health Organization (WHO) Global Program on AIDS, HIV exists in three phases: the epidemic of HIV, the epidemic of AIDS, and the epidemic of stigma, discrimination, and denial<sup>9</sup>. Individuals living with HIV have the same issues that other chronic sufferers of long term illnesses face, such as pain, physical deterioration, financial issues, and fear of death or dying. However, HIV and AIDS are unique in the sense that it can be sexually transmitted. This may result in seeing a partner get ill first, sexual rejection, or further isolation. A mental health issue resulting from HIV is also known as demoralization, which has many symptoms similar to depression. This is a result of stigmatization, and may be treated with therapy. Anxiety is a common affect of living with HIV. Individuals living with HIV are 30–50% more likely to experience mental health issues than the general population<sup>5</sup>.

### **HIV/AIDS Related Mental Health Issues**

Historically, an estimated 2–7 percent of people with advanced HIV would also experience AIDS related dementia or mania. Symptoms are similar to age related dementia; individuals may experience confusion, memory loss, severe problems concentrating, difficulties planning, behavioral changes, problems with movement and coordination. However, this is becoming an increasingly rare as HIV treatment becomes more advance.

We want to recognize that HIV and mental health are not always connected. What we do know is that people living with a mental health issue may be at greater risk of an HIV infection, that those living with HIV are dealing with emotions and situations where they may be at a greater risk to develop a mental health issue, and that those living with HIV and/or AIDS for a long period of time may (on a rare occasion) develop mental health issues due to the medication. AIDS Calgary feels it is important to make these connections to help reduce the stigma associated with HIV/AIDS.

## References

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For more information, please call (403) 508-2500 or email [info@aidscalgary.org](mailto:info@aidscalgary.org)