



and the

blues

HIV & The Blues*

By David Pieribone



HIV disease can often be accompanied by depression and anxiety. Some experts estimate that up to 30 percent of people with HIV suffer from serious depression during the course of their HIV infection.

Depression and anxiety can be serious medical conditions that if left untreated may affect your ability to function in everyday life. If you are HIV positive and suffer from depression it

could adversely affect your ability to take care of yourself. You may have difficulty taking your medication correctly or miss important medical appointments. You may take risks that would be unacceptable to you in a non-depressed state. At its worst depression can lead to suicide.

If you feel like you might be depressed or anxious it is important to get a psychiatric evaluation. Effective treatments are available.

What are possible symptoms of depression?

If five or more of these symptoms are present every day for at least two weeks and interfere with routine daily activities such as work, self-care, and childcare or social life, seek a professional evaluation for depression.

- Persistent sad, anxious, or “empty” mood
- Feelings of hopelessness, pessimism
- Feelings of guilt, worthlessness, helplessness
- Loss of interest or pleasure in hobbies and activities that you once enjoyed, including sex
- Decreased energy, fatigue, being “slowed down”
- Difficulty concentrating, remembering, making decisions
- Insomnia, early-morning awakening, or oversleeping
- Appetite and/or weight changes
- Thoughts of death or suicide, or suicide attempts
- Restlessness, irritability.

What other problems might I notice if I’m depressed?

Besides the things listed above, you may experience some of the following problems if you are depressed:

- Criticizing, attacking, and berating yourself
- Skipping days of work or not going to work
- Inability to study or pursue serious intellectual or artistic interests
- Loss of interest in sex
- Avoiding friends or usual social activities, hobbies, or recreations
- Inability to enjoy activities or events in which you normally take pleasure
- Neglecting yourself physically (in terms of grooming and hygiene)
- Forgetfulness
- Crying a lot or feel like crying without knowing why
- Feeling irritable and getting into arguments easily
- Increased and excessive use of alcohol or other recreational drugs.

What can I do on my own if I am feeling depressed?

- Exercise: Clinical experience and some studies show that exercise, particularly aerobic exercise, may help lessen some symptoms of depression. If you feel depressed, resuming or increasing physical activity is a simple, healthy, effective way to reduce symptoms for many people.
- Get adequate sleep, if possible.
- Try to eat a healthy diet.
- Spend time with friends and in social settings, rather than remaining isolated.
- Postpone making major decisions until you are feeling better.

Some people use herbal remedies to treat depression such as St. John's Wort. While these herbal medications may treat the symptoms of depression they can often interact with other medications you are taking. Never take herbal remedies without first discussing them with your doctor. For example, St. John's Wort can cause the levels of certain HIV medications to become dangerously low in the blood, which can cause HIV to progress and possibly become resistant to the medication you are taking to treat it.

What Causes Depression and Anxiety?

Because depression and anxiety can have many causes it is some times difficult to identify the exact cause. However seeking the help of a mental health professional can help you to understand some of the things that may be causing the problem.

Learning of an HIV diagnosis will naturally result in a certain amount of emotional distress. While a diagnosis of

HIV can certainly lead to anxiety and distress, these are transient feelings in most people, and are not the same as clinical depression. Short-term anxiety and distress can be treated with supportive and other types of psychotherapy. More serious depressions may require both psychotherapy and antidepressant medications.

Other causes of depression

Men with low testosterone may suffer from decreased energy, loss of appetite, loss of sexual desire and feelings of depression. You can determine your testosterone level with a simple blood test, and should receive testosterone replacement if your level is low.

Certain medications prescribed by your doctor to treat HIV and its complications can actually have side effects that can cause or worsen depression and other psychological symptoms. The chart below lists some of the more commonly

prescribed medications that can may trigger or worsen depression or anxiety. (see chart)

The use of recreational drugs can cause depression or anxiety. Alcohol, amphetamines (crystal), cocaine, ecstasy, marijuana and ketamine (Special K) can cause depression and anxiety or worsen it. Some people use recreational drugs to treat their depression, however recreational drug use can actually make depression and anxiety worse, even if you are taking anti-depression medications.

Remember, depression is a treatable disorder of the brain. Depression can be treated in addition to whatever other illnesses a person might have, including HIV. If you think you may be depressed or know someone who is, don't lose hope. Seek help for depression.

Medications used in the treatment of HIV and related problems that can cause or worsen depression and other mood disorders.

| Medication | Use | Possible Side Effects |
|------------------------------------|---|--|
| Interferon alfa (Roferon-A) | Treatment for Hepatitis C infection | Depression, fatigue |
| Interleukin | Immune enhancing therapy | Depression, disorientation, confusion |
| Anabolic Steroids | Treatment for weight loss and muscle loss also used for treatment of anemia | Mania or depression |
| Efavirenz (Sustiva) | Used in combination with other medications in the treatment of HIV | Decreased concentration, depression, nervousness, nightmares, hallucinations, confusion, mood lability |
| Zidovudine (AZT, Retrovir) | Used in combination with other medications in the treatment of HIV | Depression |
| Zalcitabine (ddC, Hivid) | Used in combination with other medications in the treatment of HIV | Depression, cognitive impairment |
| Stavudine (d4T, Zerit) | Used in combination with other medications in the treatment of HIV | Depression, mania, asthenia |
| Vinblastine and Vincristine | Used to treat certain types of cancers | Depression, cognitive impairment |

Depression resources:

www.nami.org

www.mentalhealth.com

www.thebody.com

www.medscape.com/psychiatryhome

Design by Michael Store

**Produced by IMPACTO! Transnacional. This article originally appeared as part of "Head Project", an HIV prevention effort sponsored by the City of WeHo and created with Designer Andy Williams.*

