



Toronto People With AIDS Foundation

# Treatment Bulletin

## Anxiety, Depression & HIV

January 2010 No. 1



### Disclaimer

The Treatment Resources Program at the Toronto People With AIDS Foundation provides information and resources to empower people living with HIV/AIDS to be proactive around their health by working in partnership with their health care providers. We do not recommend or promote any treatment in particular. We strongly urge those interested in any specific treatment to consult a wide range of resources, including a qualified medical and/or complementary therapy practitioner who has experience in working with HIV+ individuals.

### Permission to Reproduce

This document may be reprinted in its entirety for non-commercial purposes without prior permission, but permission must be obtained to edit or otherwise alter its content. The following credit must appear on any reprint:

This information is provided by the **Toronto People With AIDS Foundation (PWA)**. For more information, contact PWA at 416.506.1400.

We often think of health as how we feel physically, or even simply just having an absence of disease. The importance of mental health can often be underestimated and overlooked. Not only is your mental state important in its own right, but there is a strong connection between the both physical and mental health. Have you ever felt sad or depressed and lost your appetite? Have you ever felt nervous and experienced diarrhea? Have you ever felt stressed out and had tense muscles or a headache? These are just a few examples of how your mental health status and the way you are feeling can impact your physical health.

As with any chronic illness, anxiety and depression can be common among people living with HIV/AIDS (PHA's). There are many factors that can influence your mood & how you feel. Medications, various life events that can act as psychological stressors, or even chemical imbalances within your brain, can all lead to symptoms of anxiety and depression.

This treatment bulletin is intended to provide you with information regarding anxiety & depression, how to identify it, and what your options are, in the context of being an HIV+ individual.

## **Anxiety**

Anxiety is a feeling of nervousness, apprehension, fear, or worry. It can be a normal reaction to a situation such as taking a test, can occur for no reason, or can be out of proportion to what would be expected for the situation. In cases where it interferes with your ability to function normally and carry out all of your activities, it is problematic and should be addressed.

Signs and symptoms that are commonly associated with anxiety include excessive or prolonged worry, irritability, fatigue, difficulty concentrating or sleeping, and muscle tension.

In more severe cases, anxiety can manifest as panic attacks. Panic attacks are intense periods of fear which occur over a short period of time (usually minutes), and are associated with a number of physical complaints such as heart palpitations (feeling as though your heart is racing), sweating, trembling, shortness of breath, dizziness, nausea, hot flashes or chills, and/or a feeling as though your mind has gone blank. Panic attacks can be severely debilitating for those who experience them.

## ***Anxiety & HIV***

Anxiety disorders affect 12% of the population and are the most common mental illness in Canada. As with any chronic serious medical condition, anxiety is also commonly reported among HIV+ individuals, for varying reasons.

Initial diagnosis, declining CD4 counts, disclosure and other stigma-related issues are just a few of the events that a PHA has to deal with over the course of their life as an HIV+ individual, which are all normally associated with anxiety. A certain level of anxiety with such events is a completely normal response. When it becomes prolonged or begins to disrupt your quality of life, it may fall into the category of an anxiety disorder and should be addressed, either through counseling or other treatment options available through your health care practitioner.

## ***Anxiety & your physical health***

Anxiety puts our body into what is called a "fight or flight" response. This response is intended to prepare us to fight or run from a perceived threat and results in physical reactions that can help us to do so. For example, increasing heart rate, slowing digestion and diverting blood supply to muscles, heightened awareness, pupil dilation and relaxation of the bladder & evacuation of the colon (which is why increased urination and diarrhea are common with anxiety) are all expected responses if one were going to prepare to fight or run.

Prolonged anxiety can have serious physical effects on your body. Chronic tension can result in muscle aches and pain and contribute to headaches. Appetite loss can be associated with anxiety, which can contribute to muscle wasting. Anxiety can also cause indigestion, stomach upset, diarrhea, all as a result of the fight or flight response.

## **Treating Anxiety**

It is completely normal to feel a little bit nervous or anxious in certain circumstances for a short period of time. If the feelings won't go away after several weeks-months, interfere in your ability to function in any part of your life (socially, professionally, personally), or become progressively worse or manifest in panic attacks, seek help from your family doctor or other health care practitioner.

Your doctor may recommend several treatments from anxiety medication to counseling. It is important that you identify where the anxiety is stemming from in order to treat it properly.

### *Tips for Managing Anxiety*

- Yoga has been shown to decrease the stress response, improve mood, and ease anxiety & tension significantly. There are many types of Yoga – explore and find one that works well for you. In addition to yoga studios, yoga is often offered at community centres and available on video to do at home.
- Meditation involves focusing your breath and your thoughts, which can help you to be more conscious of yourself and your feelings, and promote relaxation. It can be done on your own, guided with a CD, or with an expert who can teach you until you are comfortable meditating on your own.
- Deep breathing can have a calming effect on the body. In a relaxed state we naturally breathe all the way into our abdomen so that the stomach rises with each breath. In an anxious state, breathing becomes shallow and remains in the chest. Refocusing your breathing so that you are taking full, deep breaths into the abdomen can help to bring the body into a more relaxed state. This can be done anywhere, anytime, and is an effective tool in managing anxiety.
- Consider herbal therapies to help manage mild to moderate anxiety. If you are on anti-retroviral therapy (HAART) or any other medications, check with a qualified health care practitioner to ensure that there are no interactions.
- Acupuncture can be a useful tool in managing anxiety as well as many other health conditions. Seek a qualified practitioner trained in traditional Chinese medicine who can provide acupuncture.

## **Depression**

Depression is a feeling of intense sadness that lasts for a prolonged period of time and keeps you from being able to function normally. As with anxiety, short periods of sadness and mild depression in reaction to difficult life events are completely normal. If the feelings become overwhelming or won't go away, you may be suffering from clinical depression, which can be treated.

Depression is often experienced as feelings of helplessness and/or hopelessness. There may be a loss of interest and pleasure in activities or hobbies & life in general. Fatigue, difficulty concentrating, difficulty sleeping or sleeping too much, are also commonly experienced by people with depression. There are varying degrees and types of depression that can be diagnosed, and you should see a trained health professional who can assess and diagnose the type of mood disorder that you may be suffering from.

Major Depressive Episode is one type of depression and is officially diagnosed when 5 or more of the following symptoms have occurred during the same 2 week period:

- Depressed mood during most of the day
- Fatigue or loss of energy almost every day
- Feelings of worthlessness or guilt almost every day
- Impaired concentration, indecisiveness nearly every day
- Insomnia or hypersomnia (excessive sleeping) almost every day
- Significantly diminished interest or pleasure in almost all activities almost every day
- Recurring thoughts of death or suicide, with or without a plan
- Feeling of either restlessness or being slowed down nearly every day
- Significant weight loss or gain (more than 5% of your body weight in a month)

## **Depression & HIV**

The diagnosis of depression can sometimes be difficult since the symptoms related to HIV infection can be similar to the physical symptoms of depression. Fatigue, low libido, poor appetite, and weight loss can occur in both HIV-related illness and depression.

There are several risk factors for developing depression and depression occurs at much higher rates in PHAs than in the general population. Depression can have particularly detrimental effects on the health of PHAs and therefore it is very important that it not go undiagnosed and/or untreated.

Studies have shown that PHAs who are depressed may experience faster disease progression and may not live as long as PHAs who are not depressed. Depression is also associated with poorer adherence to medication, which can in turn, lead to drug resistance.

Other factors which may contribute to or may make depression in PHAs more likely to occur include:

- Co-infection with Hepatitis B or C, especially if being treated with interferon
- Being female
- Previous or family history of mental illness, substance or alcohol abuse
- Lack of social support
- Not disclosing your HIV status to those around you
- Treatment failure

Certain HIV medications can also cause depression, most notably Efavirenz (Sustiva). If you are starting a new treatment regimen that contains a medication known to cause depression, talk to your doctor about what warning signs to look for. Let those around you know what is going on so that they can keep an eye out for any signs of depression, which you may not be able to recognize on your own.

## **Depression & your physical health**

Depression can have many effects on your physical health. From feeling fatigued to not eating and sleeping, all of these symptoms can negatively impact the way that your body functions. Not eating or sleeping properly can decrease your capacity to deal with stressful situations, can lead to weight loss and nutritional deficiencies, exacerbate your anxiety or depression, and overall leave you feeling unwell.

### *Tips for Managing Depression*

If you think you may be prone to or may be suffering from depression, no matter how mild or severe, see someone who can provide you with help in getting assessed and/or treated. Some other things that you can do to ensure that you are adequately supported and taken care of include:

- **Talk to friends and family you trust.** Let them know what's going on with you and don't be afraid to ask for help. People who are depressed have a tendency to withdraw and not want to interact with others, however, your relationships with those closest to you can help you get through the difficult days.
- **Remain engaged in social activities even if you don't feel like it.** Getting out when you don't feel like it can be tough, but being around others can help you to feel less depressed. Even meeting a friend for a weekly coffee date or having a loved one check in with you regularly can help you feel connected.
- **Join a support group** where you can exchange your experiences with those who are also suffering from depression and can share strategies for coping. It is also a great way to get out and meet people.
- **Take care of yourself.** Do activities you enjoy, be creative, and ensure you are eating healthy and regularly, even if these are things that you don't feel like doing.
- **Eat a healthy diet that supports your mood.** Certain dietary habits can have a negative impact on your mood. Always ensure you are eating regular meals and try to snack in between, making sure you are eating something at least every 3-4 hours. Also focus on eating whole foods, avoiding refined carbohydrates and high amounts of sugar, which can often lead to a "crash" and leave you feeling sluggish.

## *Tips for Managing Depression continued...*

- **Yoga and meditation** can help with relaxation and stress management, which can in turn help to alleviate some of your depression and help to put you in a more positive frame of mind.
- **Exercise** is an extremely important tool for managing depression. It has powerful mood-boosting effects, likely due to its ability to stimulate endorphin production (hormones your body makes that have a positive effect on mood). Even though it can be difficult to motivate yourself to be active when you are feeling depressed, getting up and out can make you feel better in the long term. Exercise can be as traditional as going to the gym or playing a sport or as simple as taking a walk. Try to get some activity in daily, aiming for at least 10 minutes a day, and working up to 30 minutes daily, if possible.
- **Complementary therapies** can be useful in managing mild-moderate depression. Herbal, nutritional, and homeopathic remedies, as well as acupuncture, have been shown to help symptoms of depression but should only be taken under the supervision of a licensed health care professional who has experience working with HIV+ individuals, especially if you are on medication, as there may be interactions.

### **Where to get help**

- **Primary care doctor.** Your doctor, whether it be your HIV specialist or your family doctor, will be able to address your mental health concerns in several ways. In addition to being able to assess you for depression and anxiety, they may prescribe anti-depressant or anti-anxiety medication, refer you for counseling or to a mental health professional better equipped to work with you on your specific issues. Don't be afraid to bring up any concerns you may have with them. If your depression is a side effect of medications you may be taking, an alternate medication may be recommended. Some anti-depressant medications can have psychological side effects. Speak to your doctor about what you can expect.
- **Psychologist/Psychiatrist.** Psychiatrists are medical doctors who specialize in mental illness and can prescribe medications in addition to providing counseling or psychotherapy. Psychologists, on the other hand, are trained counselors and psychotherapists but cannot prescribe medication. They may have a doctoral degree and also be called "doctor", but they are not medical doctors. You generally need a referral from your primary care doctor to see a psychiatrist, as with any specialist. Whether you see a psychiatrist or psychologist can be decided with your primary care doctor and will be dependent on your needs.
- **AIDS Service Organization (ASO).** Your local ASO will have plenty of resources that can help you with your mental health needs. From information on depression and anxiety to referral services and counselors on staff, it is a good place to start and to have someone help you make sense of your options.
- **Support groups.** All major cities will have some form of support group for anxiety and depression and likely support groups to address the mental health needs of PHAs specifically. Support groups are a way to share your experiences and learn from the experiences of others who are going through a similar situation or experiencing similar emotions. The groups are usually led by a trained, knowledgeable facilitator, who will ensure a safe, welcoming environment in which you can express your emotions and thoughts. Contact your local ASO or your primary care physician, both of whom should be able to direct you to an appropriate support group.

Depression and anxiety should be taken seriously. They can worsen and contribute to a multitude of other health conditions as well as a number of high-risk behaviors, such as substance and alcohol abuse, which can further intensify your symptoms. As difficult as it may be, try to let those around you – friends, family, health care practitioners – know what you are dealing with so that they can be there to help you through – you don't have to do it alone!

## Acknowledgements

This treatment bulletin was written and designed by Jennifer Grochocinski, ND, Treatment Resources Coordinator at the Toronto People With AIDS Foundation (PWA)

PWA thanks Melissa Egan and the Canadian AIDS Treatment Information Exchange (CATIE) for reviewing the content of this treatment bulletin to ensure accuracy and to Alex McLeod for his help in formatting the bulletins.

PWA also thanks Abbot Virology, Bristol-Myers Squibb, Gilead, ViiV Healthcare in partnership with Shire Canada, Merck Frosst, and Tibotec for supporting PWA's Treatment Bulletins and Lounge & Learn workshop program.



### **Toronto People With AIDS Foundation**

200 Gerrard Street East, 2nd Floor

Toronto, Ontario M5A 2E6

Telephone: 416.506.8606

Fax: 416.506.1404

General Inquiries: [info@pwatoronto.org](mailto:info@pwatoronto.org)

Charitable Registration # 13111 3151 RR0001

### **Mission**

The Toronto People With AIDS Foundation exists to promote the health and well-being of all people living with HIV/AIDS by providing accessible, direct, and practical support services