



Toronto People With AIDS Foundation

## Treatment Bulletin

### Stress & HIV: the good, the bad, & the ugly

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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.

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Stress is a common occurrence everyone deals with at some point in their lives. Whether it be due to everyday life events or major life stressors, it is important that everyone has coping strategies to manage their stresses, both big and small.

This treatment bulletin is intended to provide you with information and tools that you can use to help you to manage your stress in a positive, healthy way.

### **Types of Stress**

Believe it or not, stress is not just stress. There are various types of stress, both good and bad, and many sources of stress, some which happen repeatedly and some that occur at certain times throughout one's life.

**Acute Stress** is stress that is immediate, intense, and that triggers the fight-or-flight response in your body. The fight-or-flight response is a physical reaction intended to prepare you to fight or run from a perceived threat and results in physical reactions that can help you to do so. For example, non essential body functions, such as digestion, temporarily slow, blood gets diverted to your muscles, and your heart rate and breathing increase. All of these would help you to run or fight if you encountered a threatening situation. With periods of high and intense stress, from serious events such as the death of a family member or difficult situation, to something less traumatic such as a busy day spent juggling multiple tasks, the body reacts in a similar way as though it were under threat.

**Chronic Stress** is stress that causes or results in prolonged periods of tension and can lead to a variety of physical symptoms. Chronic stress can occur as a result of ongoing acute stress or from constant every day worries such as finances, work stress, or relationship difficulties, which sometimes seem as though they will never end. The effects tend to be subtler than in acute stress, such as headaches or fatigue, but can take longer to go away or have lasting effects once the stress settles.

**Eustress** is good stress that results from the demand of positive situations and can have healthy and beneficial effects. Eustress can motivate us, improve our performance, or give us a feeling of fulfillment. Examples of eustress include competing in a sport, completing a fun and challenging task, riding a roller coaster or watching a scary movie. All of these activities place a physical or mental demand on us but also give us excitement and can increase our creativity and motivation.

### **Sources of Stress**

Stress can come from a variety of sources and everyone handles stress differently. For some individuals, simple day-to-day activities can pose a challenge. For others, stress is only experienced with life-changing events, such as the death of a loved one. Stress can come from internal stressors that are self-generated, such as perfectionism, pessimism, or a need to always be in control, or external factors, discussed below. There are several factors influencing a person's ability to tolerate stress including their level of social support and optimism, certain personality traits, and how reactive or "sensitive" their nervous system is. Some common external sources of stress include:

**Every day tasks** such as cooking, cleaning, and managing a busy schedule full of appointments or other activities can pose a challenge for some individuals. Multi-tasking several events at once can be a challenge, especially when having to manage the responsibilities all on one's own.

**Work** is a very common source of stress. Most people will typically think of having a heavy workload as the reason for stress on the job but there are many other sources of workplace stress. Being under-challenged or bored at work can create stress for some and leave them feeling unfulfilled. Difficult workplace relationships and conflicts, either with co-workers, clients/customers, or supervisors can create a particularly stressful work environment.

**Finances** are stressful for many people. Cost of living expenses, especially within major cities in North America, can be quite expensive. Combine that with the expenses associated with living with a chronic illness, job loss, and recession, and it is no wonder finances can be a stress for many individuals!

**Health** in particular can be a source of stress for PHA's. As with anyone living with a chronic illness, the toll of doctors appointments, medication schedules, bouts of feeling unwell, and/or coming to terms with your illness can seem overwhelming at times. When those that we care about are also experiencing their own health issues, this can also be stressful as we try to cope with a loved one's illness and/or assisting in their care.

**Life changes**, whether good or bad, can be stressful. Starting a new job, getting married, moving to a new home, beginning or ending a relationship, are just some examples of major life events which result in significant changes in one's life. Even though most of these events can be seen as positive, often there is significant planning and/or anticipation involved, which can be stressful, although this type of stress can generally be considered eustress.

**Relationships** can be challenging at the best of times. When relationship issues arise, with friends, family, partners, they can be extremely stressful and impact other areas of our lives. They can also be a source of eustress, often bringing excitement and anticipation.

**Loss** is something that everyone will experience at some point in their lives. Whether expected or not, it is never easy and can result in periods of acute stress. Loss can come in various forms, whether it be the death of a loved one, the end of a relationship, a job, or a friendship. In any of these situations, it is normal to experience bouts of acute stress, which over time, if not resolved, can turn into chronic stress or even anxiety or depression.

### **Symptoms of stress**

Stress can present in many different ways and sometimes isn't immediately obvious. It can affect your body, your emotions and even your behavior.

Headaches, back and shoulder stiffness & pain, stomach upset, heart palpitations, and sleep problems are common physical issues caused by stress. Prolonged stress can also lead to high blood pressure, heart disease, and decreased immunity, which can be particularly problematic for PHA's who's immune systems are already compromised.

The impact of stress on your emotions and behaviors may not be as obvious as the physical symptoms at first. For some, stress causes irritability, anxiety, restlessness, a lack of focus and/or forgetfulness. It can cause a lack of appetite or overeating, lead to drug or alcohol abuse, increase smoking, social withdrawal and cause relationship conflicts. It is easy to see how one may not necessarily attribute these symptoms to stress since each one of these emotional and behavioral changes can have many causes outside of stress.

### **Stress and HIV**

Since prolonged stress can depress the immune system, stress is of particular importance for individuals living with HIV/AIDS. Studies have shown that chronic stress, traumatic events, and depression can all lead to an increased viral load and decreased CD4 counts, and therefore, accelerate HIV disease progression. Stress is a reality for many people living with HIV/AIDS. Chronic illness brings with it the stress of managing doctors appointments, medications and side effects. PHAs may also have to deal with stigma-related issues and discrimination. All of this is in addition to the regular stressors everyone encounters during their lives. With the effects on HIV disease progression, it is extremely important that PHAs develop effective coping techniques to manage their stressors.

### **Stress and Nutrition**

It may seem like these two words have nothing to do with each other, but stress and nutrition definitely have a relationship. Stress can lead to poor dietary habits, and poor dietary habits can actually make stress worse!

**Caffeine.** When overworked and overstressed, people may tend to increase their caffeine consumption to help give them an extra boost. Excess caffeine intake can actually make you feel more stressed by increasing your heart rate and making you feel more on edge. It can also interfere with your sleep at night, leaving you feeling more tired and less able to cope with stress.

***Skipping meals.*** When constantly on the go, it is easy to forget to stop and eat along the way! Have you ever been so busy that all of a sudden you realize that it's the afternoon and you missed lunch and are starving? You are much more likely to make poor food choices in a situation like this. Making sure you are eating regularly is an important part of stress management!

***Unhealthy food choices.*** Have you ever noticed that when you're feeling stressed out you tend to crave foods that are high in fat, sugar & salt? This is, in part, due to increased levels of cortisol, a hormone produced by your body in response to stress. Many people are emotional eaters and eat in response to stress. When pressed for time, we may also turn to quick & unhealthy food choices such as fast food or ready-made microwavable meals, which are often high in fat and sodium, and lack many essential nutrients. Both skipping meals and unhealthy food choices can cause blood sugar fluctuations, which can lead to mood swings, poor concentration, and fatigue, and overall leave you feeling less capable of managing your stress.

### *Tips for Managing Stress*

***Identify the source of the stress*** – only then can you really begin to manage it. Whether the stress comes from an external or internal source it is important to identify it so that you can eliminate it or learn coping skills to manage it. Identifying the source can be difficult and may not be so obvious at first. For example, a seemingly heavy workload may actually be the result of procrastination – in which case the procrastination is the source of the stress, not the workload. Try keeping a journal to help you identify your sources of stress, noting times when you feel stress, what you were doing at the time, possible causes that led to that situation, etc. This may help you to identify patterns that may be difficult to see otherwise.

***Learn to say no.*** The word “no” can be one of the most important tools that you have in helping you to prevent additional unnecessary stress. This can be difficult, especially when having to say no to a loved one or a friend, but recognizing when you are stretched to your maximum and can't take on anymore responsibility is important to help prevent further stress.

***Time management*** is particularly important when the source of your stress is a busy schedule. Taking time to plan out your day and even week can go a long way in helping you to feel more organized and in control.

***Learn to accept things you cannot change.*** This is particularly important. There are so many factors in our lives that are out of our control, such as the behavior of other people. Look at road blocks you may face in your life as an opportunity to grow and learn and try to face them with a positive attitude.

***Make time for fun & relaxation daily.*** Balance is an extremely important part of stress management. Take time out of your day to relax – even if it is only 10 minutes daily – and take a break from your responsibilities. Do activities you enjoy such as reading, walking, watching a movie, journaling, taking a bath, drawing, or listening to music. It can be anything – as long as you enjoy it!

***Take up a healthy lifestyle.*** Taking care of yourself physically can help you to tolerate stress much better. To put it simply, when you feel better, you are able to react better. Living a health lifestyle involves many things. Eating well, ensuring adequate & proper sleep, and exercising regularly are all components of a healthy lifestyle. If you need guidance with any of these don't be afraid to ask someone who can help you, including your healthcare practitioner.

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### **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