

New research finds HIV-related events lead to PTSD

HIV events such as receiving the diagnosis, having physical symptoms, obtaining treatment, coming out as positive and witnessing someone die from HIV-related illness have been found to be potentially traumatic. The first UK study to examine trauma and personal growth in gay men found that 33% of gay men had posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) in response to HIV events. We know that receiving the HIV diagnosis can be highly distressing, however, the research found that it was not the most likely event to contribute to PTSD. Trauma was most likely in individuals who experienced intense emotional distress in response to receiving HIV treatment or found HIV physical symptoms threatening.

The study showed that the emotions experienced during an event were key in understanding why some people were traumatised. Individuals who experienced intense fear, and in some cases, humiliation during an event were more likely to suffer PTSD. “This points to the double stress that people living with HIV have to deal with,” said Dr Anthony Theuninck, Clinical Psychologist, who conducted the study. “On the one hand people face the stress of dealing with the threat HIV may pose to physical health, on the other hand people face the social threat that stigma may pose.” It was found that prejudice such as homophobia and HIV stigma contributed to making it difficult to cope with the stress of HIV events.

Additionally, the study found that most individuals showed personal growth in adapting to living with HIV adversity. Individuals showed a capacity for growth, even when they experienced high levels of distress. This indicates the resilience and resourcefulness of people living with HIV. Some people may benefit from services that support personal growth and coping with the effects of prejudice which may help build resilience and prevent trauma.

However, positive growth was not found to lower traumatic distress. Individuals suffering PTSD may therefore require psychological treatment specifically focused on traumatic HIV-related events. Exploring the effects of fear and humiliation or shame that was experienced during such events may be helpful. Service providers may also need to be alert to individuals’ distress around certain HIV-related events like having physical symptoms or receiving medical treatment for HIV. For some, additional support during these times may help.

More information and results from the research study are available on the research website: www.stress-hiv-research.org.uk. For those who are concerned about the amount of stress they are currently experiencing, it is recommended that they get in touch with the nearest HIV support service. For guidance on services, the national HIV helpline run by THT Direct can be contacted on 0845 12 21 200 (10am and 10pm Monday to Friday, and 12 noon to 6pm on Saturday and Sunday).

Dr Anthony Theuninck can be contacted on stresshivresearch@yahoo.co.uk or 07949313216.

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