

A Public Health Concern: Special Considerations for the HIV Patient *Psychological Cofactors to Consider*

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Preface

Each illness or disease gives rise to unique circumstances and challenges for both patient and practitioner. What is importantly different about HIV and its treatment that makes it particularly challenging to the patient? Psychiatrists and other healthcare providers can better serve this distinct patient group if they better understand these coincidental factors.

Discussion

Many (but not necessarily all) coincidental factors regarding the HIV patient to be considered are as follows:

- **Medicine Quantity:** The large amounts of medicines that a patient must ingest can be a struggle for many patients. The large amount of requisite medicines may be difficult for many patients to ingest; the recall of timing may be a burden.
- **Medicine Timing:** The patient's life now revolves around a strict timeline of pills and physician or hospital visits, rather than that of a former routine of work, recreation, family, and friends.
- **Medicine Side Effects.** The HIV patient undergoing treatment is subject to numerous adverse affects, both physical and emotional, from the "cocktail" of medicines.
- **Medicine Deprivation:** The lack of effective medicines and the unavailability of medicines to certain underprivileged groups are a major source of hardship, frustration, and discouragement to patients trying to cope with HIV.
- **Medicine Cost:** The high cost of the medicines compounds the burdens borne by those afflicted.
- **Treatment Contraindications and/or Diminished Effectiveness:** Some of the medicines for the treatment of a psychiatric component of the patient's overall condition may have efficacy diminished by other medicines the patient may be taking, or may be contraindicated altogether.
- **Isolation:** Loss of friends, family and support systems can occur; loss of work, human interaction, and life structure can be detrimental. People may fear being around a person infected with HIV leaving the infected person as a social outcast.
- **Financial Worries and Stress:** The loss of work and income and the subsequent loss of the wherewithal to pursue and partake in usual activities and interests deepen these patients' difficulties.
- **Diminished Self-Esteem:** The loss of work and income and becoming less able to depend on or take care of themselves, erodes their morale, self-confidence, self-worth, and self-respect.
- **Purposeless Feeling:** The physical, psychological, and emotional effects of HIV (compounded by pharmaceutical side effect) can lead to a disintegration of ambition and a feeling of despondency and life without purpose or meaning.
- **Intractable Circumstances:** The HIV patient is faced with frustration, resentment, and despair in knowing that more could be done in the way of research, treatment, and cure. Progress is restrained by the lack of funding, political machinations, and bureaucratic red tape.
- **Uncertainty:** The HIV patient invariably struggles with, and is haunted by, the thought "will they live or will they die?"

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Conclusion

There is a compelling need for patience, understanding, and ability and resourcefulness when caring for the HIV patient; psychiatric intervention and psychotherapy may be integral to their care. Those who contract this disease will present a differentiating set of challenges (physical, emotional, and psychological) that the psychiatrist, other healthcare providers, and society as a whole should consider and address distinctly and intelligently.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The author declares that this Commentary was written in the absence of any commercial or financial relationship that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.