Damsels in De-Stress

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Better unearth that therapist's phone number at the bottom of your things-to-do pile. The old adage that stress zaps the immune system has long been widely accepted, but the physiological proof in HIVers has been largely missing. Now University of Miami researchers report significant decreases in norepinephrine—a stress-boosted hormone that can undermine the immune system—in those receiving counseling. In 73 HIVers, those who underwent 10 two-hour, weekly stress-management group sessions showed significantly lower levels of the hormone in their urine (collected over 24 hours) than did those in the control group. The decreases in this potentially harmful hormone, often chronically elevated in HIV disease, were in line with the participants' own reports of reduced anxiety and anger. Even better news: In the year that followed the training, the CD8 cells that are known to be important in controlling HIV were significantly higher in those who'd done the de-stressing than in the controls.

Michael Antoni, PhD, the study's lead author, points out that HIVers too often have disproportionately high numbers of life-stress factors—from job loss, social stigma and steep medical expenses to physical and neurological symptoms and frequent bereavement. He says the approach his team used—group-based cognitive-behavioral stress-management training—"helps people assess the stressful events in their lives and identify the best personal and social resources to help them manage their response." And he adds that reducing stress may also help boost adherence to complex medication regimens. Yoga, anyone?

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