Protecting Your Mental Health

Advice from long-term survivors on learning to live with HIV.

May 14, 2021 By Alicia Green

Mental health plays an important role in how people with HIV navigate life with the virus. A negative mental state can affect treatment adherence, relationships and, most important, self-esteem. Side effects, such as weight gain, may go unaddressed.

Below are testimonies from long-term survivors about how to manage your mental health while living with HIV.

Robert GillumJamey Guy

Robert Gillum, age 54, Virginia

“I’m an advocate of therapy, especially in communities of color, where therapy is taboo. As a man of color, there aren’t a lot of safe places that you can really be free to say what you think and feel and to address the hurts in your life.

“Therapy changed my life. It’s helped me to stay emotionally and mentally healthy for the last 28 years.

“I think therapy can also be whatever brings a person relief or enjoy. It’s music and art for me. I love Broadway and concerts. That’s been my medicine since I’ve been a kid. That’s what I do when everything else fails.”

Pat MigliorePhoto: Tegra Stone Nuess

Pat Migliore, age 68, Washington

“Your mental health is just as important as your physical health. Get a referral from your doctor to see a mental health professional. There may be underlying mental health problems that existed before HIV or there may be depression because of HIV.

“Another part of mental health is going to a support group, which is just a place where you can vent to peers who are going or have gone through the same experiences.

“It’s also helped for my mental health to be able to stay involved in the HIV community and to find

some new and different opportunities.”

Steve Puppe

LaTrischa Miles, age 61, Kansas

“Initially, my HIV diagnosis weighed a lot on my mental health because I thought about dying and what would happen to my children. But now that I know more about HIV and have engaged in care, it’s made me appreciate life in all of its fullness and glory.

“I try to not sweat the small stuff. I’m a positive thinker and that helps my mental health a lot, especially if things are not going well. I’m a person that sees the glass half full, knowing that if it’s not better now, it’s going to get better.

“Don’t get overwhelmed or disappointed about where you are on your health journey. As they say, ‘Rome wasn’t built in a day. Your health is not going to change in a day or on a dime. It takes time. Take small steps because those small steps are going to render big gains in the long run.”

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