

Mental HEALTH

when living
with HIV



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HIV is not specific to any group of people. It can affect everyone including young people. Yet, despite that, some people are scared to even consider being tested. If you find you are HIV positive, help is available.

WHAT TO EXPECT WHEN YOU RECEIVE POSITIVE HIV RESULTS

When receiving positive HIV results, it is common to experience some form of emotional responses; emotions ranging from shock, numbness, fear, anxiety, denial, anger or depression. These feelings are normal responses and most people will experience them, but it does get better.

Understanding that you are not alone and getting support can help you. Since the 1980's, we are now advanced with available medication and support structures than we were back then. Therefore, hearing that you are HIV positive should be something you can navigate through with a positive mindset.

It's important to be honest with your healthcare professional about your understanding of the HI-virus when you receive your results. Accurate information has been known to assist in reducing fear and anxiety about the diagnosis.

Sometimes fear is based on myths and misconceptions about HIV. Therefore, understanding HIV/AIDS facts and available treatment and support, will reduce anxiety. For instance, it can be useful to know that being HIV positive is not the same as having AIDS; the development from HIV to AIDS can take a while. Therefore, information that is more accurate will help you realise that it's not a death sentence.

Another thing to think about once you test HIV positive, is disclosure and the pressure you may feel to disclose. The thought of disclosing can provoke anxiety. Therefore, you may need to first absorb the information yourself. Understanding that it's alright to take time to absorb the information will reduce the pressure to disclose. Once ready, consider people you feel should know. However, for those with partners, it's very important to disclose to your sexual partner. This is not only important to assist with support but also for protection against re-infection. This may not be easy, but know that there are people like counsellors who are also there to assist with disclosure to partners. You can share any fears or difficulties you foresee, such as fear of a possible anger-outburst, or violence from your partner. Some healthcare professionals

or counsellors can be there every step of the way; from encouraging a partner to get tested, to assisting you in dealing with it.

Yet, we can't dispute that disclosure to trusted family members or friends can be good for support. However, there is no pressure in disclosing to them. Take your time; when you are ready, consider disclosing in order to utilise all the support available for you. Although some people may be unsupportive or discriminate, remember you're not alone; there are support groups available.

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WHAT TO DO ONCE YOU HAVE TESTED HIV POSITIVE

A person can live a long, healthy life as long as they are practicing healthy lifestyles and maintaining a positive mindset.

As a young person, hearing someone say "healthy-lifestyle" can be a bit daunting,

especially if you associate it with 'being boring'. Changing your lifestyle doesn't mean you'll be 'boring', it simply means adopting healthy living patterns by taking care of your body and mind, while having fun. This includes behavioural, physical, and psychological changes.

Some of the behavioural lifestyle decisions that may need to be made if you test positive, would be changes in sexual behaviour, and safer sex practices such as condom use.

Another decision is around the physical aspects; taking care of your body. Where you consider maintaining healthy eating patterns, taking time to exercise, while ensuring you have enough sleep and rest.

Psychological wellbeing is also crucial, as there is a direct link between your emotions and physical health. Preventing depression by receiving appropriate support and assistance in dealing with the diagnosis is useful. It is therefore important to take care of how you feel and be realistic about it. If you are not fine emotionally, seek help.

As a young person, there are still many years lying ahead for you and taking care of yourself will ensure that you have a healthy life, despite being HIV positive. Don't face this alone, reach out, and get all the support you need. 🌟