



BULLETIN

Psychological Support for People Living with HIV

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1. What is psychosocial support

Psychosocial support is the process of psychological and social empowerment of the individual, the family and social environment in order to gain power and abilities to confront the stress and overcome the crisis, to rebuild a normal, psychologically healthy and worthy style of life, without harmful consequences for the person and others.

Providing this kind of support is the primary goal of psychosocial programs. In providing psychosocial support different professional profiles may take part, professionals as well non-professionals. Actually, people who provide psychosocial support may belong to three groups:

1. Professional helpers (belonging to the helping professions, have been trained for profiles aimed at helping other people, and who perform this job everyday)
2. Non-professional helpers who have not finished a formal education for this job, but have accepted helping work, continuously perform this job and intend to do so in the future.
3. Non-professional helpers without education for helping people but did find themselves in a situation to provide support using their own capacities and skills without additional training.

The 'Psychological part' within psychosocial support is a greatly neglected theme in working with affected families and individuals, etc.

In working with persons and families in crisis the widespread issue of neglected mental health prevention and promotion can be clearly seen.



The goal of psychosocial activities is to give support to the person in crisis to get back to their baseline of psychological functioning. In the first place, it means that the person should be helped to regain personal coping mechanisms and confront the new situation. Also, the aim of the intervention is to help a person with emotional ventilation, to get free from negative emotions that could cumulatively lead to serious mental health problems. This kind of approach is not a replacement for the scientific approach. If there is the indication of serious psychological / psychiatric problems it is obligatory to refer this person or call a professional.



2. Why is psychosocial support important for persons living with HIV/AIDS?

- ❖ HIV infection affects all dimensions of a person's life: physical, psychological, social and spiritual. Counseling and social support can help people and their carers to cope more effectively with each stage of the infection and to enhance quality of life. With adequate support, PLWHA are more likely to be able to respond adequately to the stress of being infected and are less likely to develop serious mental health problems. Assessment and interventions may be aimed at the acutely stressful phase following notification of HIV infection, the ensuing adjustment period, and the process of dealing with chronic symptomatic HIV infection and disease progression through to death.
- ❖ HIV infection often can result in stigma and fear for those living with the infection, as well as for those caring for them, and may affect the entire family. Infection often results in loss of socio-economic status, employment, income, housing, health care and mobility. For both individuals and their partners and families, psychosocial support can assist people in making informed decisions, coping better with illness and dealing more effectively with discrimination. It improves the quality of their lives, and prevents further transmission of HIV infection.
- ❖ For people with HIV/AIDS who must adhere to TB treatment, long-term prophylaxis or antiretroviral therapy, on-going Counseling can be critical in enhancing adherence to treatment regimens.

Psychosocial support addresses the ongoing psychological and social problems of HIV infected individuals, their partners, families and caregivers.

3. Forms of psychosocial support

Emotional support is the special kind of communication with a focus on empathic understanding – it is the emotional insight that means partial and temporary identification with someone else's emotional situation and experiencing the same feelings as the person we communicate with. Empathy is as much a personal characteristic as it is a skill that can be learned. In their work professionals always build this kind of relation of emotional understanding that is the basic element of a therapeutic relation. Emotional support also considers unconditional acceptance, emotional warmth and encouragement of the person.

"As soon as you become HIV positive, you become hypersensitive up to ten times more than earlier ... you are constantly under stress, small things may trigger bad feelings"

"I feel sorrow permanently, not periodically. I succeeded in building a positive surface, but regardless of what you suppress, you always know where you belong"

Informative support responds to the person's need for more information. The goal is to achieve greater understanding of the situation and control over the situation. Uncertainty related to the HIV infection, as the very fast development of new treatment regimes demand constant monitoring of the new information.

That is how control is achieved and a person may have more realistic expectations on the course of the infection and efficacy of the treatment.

"Living with HIV is living underground"

Support in cognitive assessment is directed toward the change in the person's perception of the current situation- it gives clarification, and helps in defining sources of threat and sources of support. The self-assessment serves for improving the self-confidence and self-esteem, the assessment of new coping mechanisms gives an insight into new opportunities, provides hope and optimism.

"I did not pressure the person when I met him. I knew that he was HIV negative and I told him immediately my HIV positive status. I did not expect to be understood and accepted but he wanted to be in a relationship with me. We had sex without any fear or anxiety. I felt like a person, I felt loved, respected and accepted. That was very important for me and helps me to cope with bad feelings. I learned how helpful it could be for me to disclosure of my HIV positive status"

Material support often goes with implicit emotional support. One could also talk about instrumental support- it is the practical support with everyday

activities and might be especially important in the later stages of the disease. The needs for support are being changed while living with chronic disease and should be always understood in the context of a client's health status.

"Experience of others means a lot, they give me concrete pieces of advice, like, for example, when caught by panic, fear – go for a walk, talk to somebody..."

"It is important to have somebody to share it with, both in professional terms (refers to psychological assistance), and in terms of friendly attitude and health related matters, otherwise, you fall into depression".

Sometimes it takes much effort for PLHIV to maintain long-term supporting relationships (due to hospitalization, tiredness, disability, unemployment, emotional exhaustion and can result in isolation, and it is important to seek support from a great number of sources.)

Emotional support is the integral ingredient of every form of psychosocial support.



4. An example of service for PLHIV: IAN's experience in providing psychosocial support to PLHIV

In 2007 International Aid Network IAN started to implement the project "Comprehensive support program for people living with HIV/AIDS, their family members and carers", with an aim to build capacities of PLHIV, their family members and carers. One of the main activities was set as direct counseling service for people infected and affected by HIV. There are several ways of psychological support that IAN service provides for beneficiaries: individual counseling, group counseling, self-support groups, family counseling, and psychiatric interventions. The total number of all clients in the first year of the project was 47, and the Total number of all psychosocial interventions was 147. The expected number of clients who are using services of psychological counseling is changing over time.

Even if everybody agrees that there is a need for psychological support, there are some barriers between users and service providers. The needs are bigger in phase of obtaining the results and at the beginning of the treatment.

Obstacles:

- ❖ Relationship with Clinic for Infective Disease. Besides good cooperation, we tried to organize promotions and advertising at the Clinic, but we could not do it without permission of the director and Ministry.
- ❖ Obstacles of psychological character. Many of them are in a phase of denial or suppression for a long time and they do not want to talk about HIV or to provoke it by coming to the counseling.

- ❖ The issue of trust/distrust is the next obstacle. Due to stigma and discrimination towards this group of people, they prefer stay silent and do not ask for help. Those who are in groups and socialize need time to gain trust in NGOs, experts, and projects.
- ❖ The next obstacle is a generally negative attitude when it comes to making the decision to ask for psychological and psychotherapeutic assistance.

Recommendations were made for further organizing of thematic seminars, groups and trainings for PLHIV through socializing and non-obligatory activities followed by pleasures (traveling, etc.). PLHIV think that psychological support should be offered but the name should not be so explicit.

