HIV and Mental Health – What We Know and Don’t Know

- PLHIV have up to twice the rates of depression and anxiety compared to the general population.
- But despite challenges of living with HIV, such as HIV-related stigma, we also know that large numbers do not live with poor mental health.
- We don’t know much about positive forms of well-being in PLHIV populations, such as resilience and flourishing. We need to know more to have a complete picture of mental health and to develop the most effective well-being support programs.

What is resilience?
- A capacity to bounce back quickly from stressful or challenging life events.
- This capacity may be increased with social support, developing specific coping strategies, learning from past experience, and other resources.
- High resilience is linked with lower risk of future mental health problems.

What is flourishing?
- The highest level of positive well-being.
- Approx. 20% of population is in a state of flourishing.
- Two main components:
  - Frequent positive emotions (happiness, contentment, optimism)
  - Sense of meaning, purpose, values (a values-driven life, being true to oneself, self-acceptance, a sense of authenticity)

Aims and Objectives
- To help provide a more complete picture of mental health in PLHIV populations by conducting a study of two key states of positive well-being: resilience and flourishing.
- The study focused on Australian HIV+ gay men in this case and had two main objectives:
  - To provide national data using standard measures of resilience and flourishing.
  - To identify demographic and psychosocial factors associated with resilience and flourishing.

Methods
- National online community-based survey known as “Healthy Minds”
  - August – December 2014
- Resilience measured with the Connor-Davidson Resilience Scale; Flourishing measured with the Flourishing Scale.
- Participants recruited via Facebook, Grindr, The Institute of Many (TIM), database of PLHIV research volunteers, promoted by HIV organisations, word-of-mouth referrals.
- 357 HIV-positive gay men aged 18 – 81 years, mean age = 46.2 years.
HIV-positive gay men had lower average resilience scores than general population data (a population-based study conducted in the United States). Large numbers had low resilience scores: 77 men (22%) had scores of 20 or less.

HIV-positive gay men were just as likely to be flourishing compared with a general population sample (a population-based study conducted in New Zealand). Large numbers had high flourishing scores: 103 men (29%) had scores > 50.

Which factors predict resilience?

- **Age**
- **Education**
- **Income**
- **Employment**
- **Country of birth**
- **In a relationship**
- **Year of HIV diagnosis**
- **Treated unfairly due to sexual orientation**
- **Treated unfairly due to HIV**
- **Internalised HIV-related stigma (e.g., shame)**
- **Number of close friends**
- **Emotional support**
- **Belonging/companionship**
- **Tangible/practical support**

Which factors predict flourishing?

- **Age**
- **Education**
- **Income**
- **Employment**
- **Country of birth**
- **In a relationship**
- **Year of HIV diagnosis**
- **Treated unfairly due to sexual orientation**
- **Treated unfairly due to HIV**
- **Internalised HIV-related stigma (e.g., shame)**
- **Number of close friends**
- **Emotional support**
- **Belonging/companionship**
- **Tangible/practical support**

Summary

- In this sample of HIV-positive gay men, resilience was lower than general population averages. But the men were no less likely to be flourishing.

- It would appear that social support is an important factor for flourishing.

- But internalised stigma appears to be a major issue for resilience. Feelings of low self-worth can make it hard for people to overcome life challenges if they already believe they are hopeless.

- In all, there are many cases of high positive well-being among HIV-positive gay men despite the challenges of living with HIV. But it is possible to be flourishing and not to have high resilience, so resilience-building programs may be needed to help the "flourishers" to keep flourishing and to help those in poorer mental health to flourish in the future.

- Need more research on resilience. Reducing stigma is important but there may be other factors that we need to know about to inform resilience-building programs.

This research was supported by funding from:

**Australian Government Department of Health**

Anthony Lyons
a.lyons@latrobe.edu.au

latrobe.edu.au 1/10/2015