

HIV & MATERNAL MENTAL ILLNESS

HIV & mental illness: HIV is a very strong risk factor for mental illness. Almost half (43.7%) of all people living with HIV/AIDS in South Africa have an identifiable mental illness which requires an intervention. This is significantly higher than the regular population (16.5%).

Common Perinatal Mental Disorder (CPMD): ‘Perinatal’ refers to the time from conception to the end of the first year post delivery. CPMDs include Major Depressive Episode and the anxiety spectrum disorders.

CPMD & HIV: HIV infection predisposes women to mental distress and CPMD contributes significantly to AIDS-related mortality. The enormous emotional strain of living with HIV, including its social and financial consequences, makes women vulnerable to depression and anxiety. On the other hand, those women with mental illness are more vulnerable to becoming HIV positive. A depressed woman is less likely to be able to negotiate safe sex due to low self-esteem, a sense of hopelessness or financial dependency.



Self-portrait:
Thembisa Mdatyulw@e

- HIV+ mothers are particularly vulnerable to mental illness during and after pregnancy.
- **Mental illness affects how women use maternity, child health services and HIV services.**
- Mental illness has been found to have negative impacts on how HIV+ women adhere to their own and their child’s HIV treatment.
- **Mental health support and social support for HIV+ mothers is vital for the general health of women, their babies and families.**

Women at risk include: Women who lack partner support, unplanned/ teenage pregnancy, past/current abuse, substance abuse in the mother or in the home, financial or housing concerns or stressful change in circumstances (e.g. recent unemployment or bereavement), previous mental health problems, previous miscarriage, abortion, stillbirth, death of a child or a frightening birth experience, a bad relationship with her mother or an absent mother, chronic illnesses or obstetric problems

HIV & mental illness related to pregnancy:

In pregnancy,

- many women learn their HIV status for the first time. They are then faced with the diagnosis as well as pregnancy that may be unwanted
- if they disclose they are positive, they can be accused of being unfaithful, be beaten or thrown out of the home by their partners or family
- women often feel anxious or guilty about transmitting the virus to their babies
- they have to adjust to the Prevention of Mother to Child Transmission (PMTCT) programme or to taking HAART.

Violence

For poor women, HIV, mental health and violence overlap in dangerous ways.

HIV + women are more likely to become victims of violence. Pregnant women are also more vulnerable to violence than non-pregnant women.

Experiencing gender-based violence places women at increased risk of both HIV and mental illness.

After pregnancy,

- women face difficult decisions about infant feeding and risk friends and family becoming suspicious that they are HIV+ if they bottle feed
- women frequently feel very anxious that their babies may be HIV+

A Special role for nurses: Nurses can play a vital role in providing empathic care to pregnant women and mothers, and in the early identification and referral of women at risk for CPMDs. Gentleness and kindness from a health professional is a powerful tool in making vulnerable women feel acknowledged and not judged.

Perinatal Mental Health Project (PMHP)

Access for all women to mental health care during and after pregnancy

The PMHP provides an integrated, on-site mental health service at 3 obstetric facilities in Cape Town. It has developed a model for providing screening, counselling and psychiatric services during pregnancy based on a local, evidence-based model for care in which mental health care is routinely integrated into maternal care. Poor women need not spend extra resources nor deal with issues of stigma. While they are attending for their pregnancy care, they can access mental health care on-site. Free materials are available from <http://pmhp.za.org/learn/pmhp-resources>.