

MEDIA RELEASE

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Mental Health Impact Highlighted on World AIDS Day – December 1st

High levels of depression among people living with HIV/AIDS and those who care for them is the subject of a new publication being launched on World AIDS Day, December 1st.

Throughout the general population depression is a common mental health problem that affects approximately 1 in 4 people at some point in their lives. Levels of depression are even higher in people living with HIV/AIDS. "Being diagnosed as HIV positive can lead to considerable psychological stress. HIV/AIDS infection can also cause changes in the brain that may lead to people developing depression, and some of the medications used in managing HIV also have other side-effects", explains Ingrid Daniels, CEO of the Cape Mental Health Society.

Depression is a mental disorder that affects mood. People with depression can feel an overwhelming sense of sadness and guilt, and may find it hard to get satisfaction from life. They may feel extremely tired, have no energy, find it difficult to concentrate, feel hopeless about the future and be preoccupied with thoughts about death and dying. Depression also affects HIV. Someone who is depressed may find it difficult to adhere to antiretroviral medication, and depression can also impact on the immune system which may result in more physical health problems or quicker HIV progression.

Caregivers of people living with HIV/AIDS are also affected by higher rates of depression. Shona Sturgeon, Immediate Past President of the World Federation for Mental Health, states: "It is clear from our grassroots partners and members that there is demonstrated need for strengthened mental health services addressing stress management, social support and self-esteem among people living with and affected by HIV. Caregivers in particular experience high levels of stress and their role can take a substantial mental health and physical toll as they care for the physical, emotional and economic needs of their family members."

While depression is a common and potentially serious mental health problem, it is treatable. Unfortunately, while depression can be treated, it is often overlooked in people living with HIV and their caregivers. This is very worrying. Ingrid Daniels explains: "Depression is not an automatic or expected reaction to being HIV-positive. People living with HIV/AIDS and their caregivers should not have to continue living with depression when effective treatments are available. More resources and increased awareness are needed to ensure that all people can access effective treatment and support services when they need them."

The publication, which is part of the World Federation for Mental Health's Africa Initiative on the Mental Health Consequences of HIV/AIDS, brings together African and International research to support a strong *Call for Action* for governments throughout Africa to give greater attention and increased priority to the pressing need to increase the availability and quality of mental health and psychosocial support services for people living with HIV/AIDS.

The publication is available for free download from www.wfmhafricainitiative.org

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Notes to the Editor – World Federation for Mental Health Africa Initiative

The World Federation for Mental Health's Africa Initiative is raising awareness and working to address the mental health consequences for people living with HIV/AIDS, their families and

caregivers. The Initiative's Cape Town Secretariat is hosted by the Cape Mental Health Society.

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