Beating the "holiday blues"

The holiday season is just around the corner. While many people look forward to holiday events and family gatherings, there are times when everyone has feelings of stress or depression. It is the same for people living with HIV/AIDS. Many are struggling with feelings of loss or loneliness. Strained relationships with families may seem worse during the holidays.

The most important thing to remember about holiday depression and stress is that bad feelings are temporary and they pass! Even though it's normal to feel down during the holidays, it's important to help yourself.

Concentrate on this “Top 10” list to improve your mood, make healthy choices, and help you manage holiday stress.

1. Make your health a priority (take your meds as prescribed, eat right, get plenty of sleep and exercise).
2. Consider attending a church or worship service — enjoy the holiday music or decorations, and listen for words that may inspire or comfort you.
3. Remind yourself that it’s okay to feel down. Tell yourself bad feelings pass.
4. Don’t spend money that you don’t have.
5. Talk with someone! Spend time with people who care about you. Make plans not to be alone.
6. Don’t argue with family members — this just makes you feel worse.
7. Consider volunteering your time to a good cause. It will get you out of the house and help you feel better about yourself. There are many organizations that will be grateful for any time you can give.
8. Don’t get tricked into believing that everyone else is happier or better off than you.
9. Try new, healthy ways to celebrate — especially ones that are free!
10. Enjoy today. Try not to focus on the past or what you don’t have.

Faced with the “Holiday Blues,” some people might focus on how bad they are feeling — or look to alcohol or drugs to escape. Neither of these are good ideas. Sometimes a 12-step program like Narcotics Anonymous or Alcoholics Anonymous can help.

Both organizations offer many West Virginia locations where weekly support meetings are held. To find the location nearest you, call the following numbers or visit these websites:

Narcotics Anonymous, Mountaineer Region
1-800-766-4442
www.mrscna.org

Alcoholics Anonymous, West Virginia
1-800-333-5051
www.aawv.org

West Virginia Al-Anon or Alateen (for partners, spouses and teenage children of alcoholics)
(304) 345-7420
www.wvafg.freeservers.com

Finally, remember that everybody has “highs” and “lows” — but if you ever find yourself in a depression that just won't go away, or if you should have feelings about hurting yourself, call your health care provider right away. There are people who care about you and want to help you feel better.

Your friends at the CAMC Ryan White Program

Visit us on the web!
Our web page is now up and running.
www.camcrwp.org

If you have comments or suggestions about improving our web page, send us an e-mail or call our outreach coordinator, Barbara Joseph at (304) 388-9979.
During a recent appearance in Charleston, author J.L. King (ON THE DOWN LOW: A Journey into the Lives of “Straight” Black Men Who Sleep with Men) made the following prediction: "Until there is a cure for the AIDS virus, African American women will continue to martyr themselves to the disease rather than risk their relationships with men by demanding they use a condom during sex.”

King, whose book has been on the New York Times Bestsellers list for more than 16 weeks, is an HIV/AIDS activist who has been invited to speak across the country. He recently appeared on Oprah and the cover of Jet magazine, and has been profiled in dozens of other publications. His book addresses a tough topic: “on the down low” is a new term for men who are married or who have girlfriends, but are secretly having sex with other men. Although this behavior is not exclusive to the African American community, its impact on African Americans was recognized in a recent study by the Centers for Disease Control.

King believes that “down low” behavior is the main reason for startling new statistics from the CDC which show that African American women account for 68 percent of all new HIV cases. In West Virginia, where African Americans represent only three percent of the state’s population, 51 percent of HIV infections in women are among African Americans. Nationally, an alarming one in 168 black women carries the HIV/AIDS virus, compared to one in 3,000 white women.

“The greatest risk factor for African American women lies in unprotected sexual intercourse with their male partners,” says a new report by AMFAR, or American Foundation for AIDS Research. “Many women are unaware that a partner engages in high-risk behaviour such as male-to-male sex or injecting drug use.”

King’s presentation was sponsored by the CAMC Ryan White Program, West Virginia Bureau for Public Health AIDS/STD Program, West Virginia Bureau for Public Health Minority Health Program, and All-Aid International. In addition to his presentation, which was free and open to the public, King also taped a 30-minute television program, Mind and Body, hosted by Sharon King. The program aired on several cable-access channels throughout the state.

Dr. Christine Teague, the program director of the CAMC Ryan White Program, said “It is estimated that hundreds of West Virginians in our area are unaware that they are HIV-positive. We hope that Mr. King’s presentation will encourage more women to get tested for the HIV-virus, and take greater personal responsibility for their health.”

Free and confidential testing is available at many locations around the state, including your local county health department. For other locations, call the toll-free West Virginia AIDS/STD Hotline at 1-800-642-8244.

Joseph is the outreach coordinator for the CAMC Ryan White Program.

To find out more about the CAMC Ryan White Program in southern West Virginia or to schedule an appointment, call toll-free 1-877-565-4423.
Many drugs can adversely affect nerves, the spinal cord and the brain. Damage like this can lead to complications such as peripheral neuropathy and mental problems.

Peripheral Neuropathy
This condition can cause pain, numbing, burning or tingling in the hands and feet secondary to nerve ending damage. It is one of the most common side effects associated with the nucleoside analogue drugs (the “nukes”), particularly the “d” drugs Zerit (d4T, stavudine) and Videx (ddI, didanosine). While it is not known exactly why peripheral neuropathy occurs, it is thought that changes in the mitochondria inside cells cause the damage to peripheral nerves in the arms and legs. Your doctor will make sure that there are no other reasons for the neuropathy, such as vitamin deficiencies or high blood sugar.

The most effective way of dealing with peripheral neuropathy, especially if it is severe, is to stop the drug(s) that may be causing it. **This should only be done upon the recommendation of your health provider.** There may or may not be alternative effective medicines available to treat your HIV infection. Peripheral neuropathy can sometimes be treated using non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs) such as ibuprofen. Applying topical creams or lotions that contain pain relievers (such as Ben Gay) has also been effective in some cases. Moderate to severe cases may respond to drugs known as tricyclic antidepressants, including amitriptyline (Elavil) or newer drugs such as Neurontin or Lamictal. If the pain is severe, narcotic pain relievers such as hydrocodone or methadone may sometimes be helpful. Other non-drug measures include avoiding tight footwear, limit walking if possible and soaking your feet in ice baths. Some people obtain relief through acupuncture, chiropractics and/or massage.

Mental Side Effects
One particular HIV medicine, efavirenz (Sustiva), presents its own unique set of nervous system side effects in about half of people taking it. Included are sensations of sleepiness, inability to sleep, vivid/strange dreams or nightmares, depression, anxiety, muddled thinking and difficulty concentrating. These problems may be especially severe for people who also use recreational drugs or alcohol, or who have current problems with depression and/or anxiety. It is thought that these feelings are due to the fact that Sustiva penetrates into the brain very well after it is absorbed into the bloodstream. While many people experience these side effects, most of the time these lessen or go away within a few hours after taking the dose. It is recommended that Sustiva be taken prior to bedtime. People taking Sustiva should also avoid driving during the first few days of taking this medicine until it is known how they feel. Fortunately, for most people taking Sustiva, these nervous system effects lessen or even go away completely after one to two months of taking the drug.

Some of the safest tips in helping to manage the side effects of Sustiva:
- Try relaxing before bedtime using techniques like yoga, breathing exercises, a soothing bath, or drinking a non-caffeinated tea

Teague is the program director of the CAMC Ryan White Program

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**Take the test!**

The decision to be tested for HIV is the first step in taking responsibility for yourself and the health of others with whom you may be intimately involved.

**HIV testing locations**

Many testing sites offer free testing, but some charge a fee. Some locations require an appointment; others accept walk-ins. Call ahead to be sure!

On the Internet you can find a list of test sites in your area by entering your zip code. Go to www.hivtest.org

By phone, you may call:
- WV AIDS/STD Hotline: 1-800-642-8244
- CAMC Ryan White Program care coordinator in Charleston: 388-9337 or toll-free: 1-877-565-4423
- National HIV/AIDS Hotline: 1-800-342-2437
- Your local county health department
Food safety and the holidays!

Arnold K. Vaughn, MA, RD, LD

Food safety is very important all year round, but it’s even more so during the holidays. During the holidays we fix bigger meals, leave food out of the fridge longer, and stuff more food in the fridge. All of these can lead to food poisoning. With care we can keep our food and ourselves happy and healthy during the holidays.

**Cook safe!** The safe way to thaw your turkey is in the fridge. Be sure not to leave it out on the counter or in the sink. Always cook your stuffing and turkey separate to make sure each gets fully cooked. Roast your turkey in an oven at a temperature of 325°F or hotter. The best way to check turkey temperatures is to use a meat thermometer. Serve your meal and get leftovers in the fridge within two hours to stay safe.

**Store safe!** Put leftovers in small containers so they cool quickly in the fridge. Leftover turkey can be kept in the fridge 3 to 4 days; stuffing and gravy 1 to 2 days. Be especially careful that you don’t put too much hot food in your fridge at one time since this can make the temperature become unsafe.

**Clean safe!** You should wash your hands often with soap, especially when handling raw meat or poultry then disinfect with bleach or bleach cleanser. This includes cooking utensils, dishes and cutting boards. This will help to kill all harmful germs.

Vaughn, a clinical dietician, is a member of the CAMC Ryan White Program’s care team.

Local organizations provide help during the holiday season

During the holiday season, there are a number of organizations that provide help to individuals and families. Food baskets, winter coats and toys for children are just some of what is available.

**Charleston AIDS Network**

CAN’s Life House Pantry will provide Thanksgiving and/or Christmas food baskets to households with one or more persons living with HIV/AIDS. All baskets will be prepackaged so clients will be able to make a quick stop by the pantry and pick up their food. Persons wishing to receive a food basket must contact Brian Henry by October 15, 2004 at (304) 344-9901 for a referral. Let Brian know if you need help with travel to pick up a basket. You do not have to be a client of the Charleston AIDS Network, or the HIV Care Consortium to receive a food basket. Generally, Life House Pantry has an active outreach to families directly affected by HIV in Kanawha, Clay, Putnam and Boone counties. They will provide food to any qualifying family (who requests a referral) in southern West Virginia, if they are able to come to the pantry in Charleston.

Charleston AIDS Network’s annual Holiday Open House will be held on December 8, 2004 from 6 to 8 p.m. at their offices at 1109 Quarrier Street in Charleston. All past and present volunteers, clients, family and friends are invited to attend. Light refreshments will be served. No alcohol is served or allowed. Please call (304) 345-4673 if you are planning to attend, and leave a message about how many will be attending with you, so they can have plenty of refreshments!

**Christmas Bureau**

Individuals or families who live in Kanawha, Boone, Putnam and Clay counties can call the Christmas Bureau at (304) 414-4405 or toll-free at 1-800-540-8659 to register for holiday help. The Christmas Bureau coordinates many local holiday assistance programs, including Secret Santa and the Salvation Army. Secret Santa provides wrapped toys for children in most of Kanawha and Boone counties. The Salvation Army has several programs, including providing toys, food and winter coats. The operator at the Christmas Bureau will provide more information.