



MENTAL HEALTH STRESSORS*

▶ ABOUT THIS ACTIVITY

 **Time:** 40 minutes

 **Objectives:** By the end of this session, participants will be able to:

- Identify some of the mental health stressors that they experience in their work.
- Discuss ways of coping effectively with mental health stressors and feelings of burnout on the job.
- Identify and describe appropriate resources for peers' own care and support.

 **Training Methods:** Small Group Discussion, Brainstorm

 **In This Activity You Will...**

- Ask small groups to reflect on stressors in their role as a peer and coping skills for these stressors. (30 minutes)
- Lead a group discussion about what each group has listed for these questions. (10 minutes)

 **Materials:**

- Newsprint - Discussion Questions
- Handout – List of Stressors
- Newsprint
- Markers
- Writing paper
- Pens/pencils for recorders

 **Preparation:**

- Prepare newsprint
- Prepare handout

Instructions

1. Introduce the session by acknowledging that HIV peer workers are in a unique position among health care workers in terms of the psychological and social impact their work may have on them. In general, HIV/AIDS health care providers have to cope with a variety of mental health stressors in their work with HIV-infected clients and patients. These stressors are many and may include feelings of grief and loss at the death of a client, frustration at not being able to “fix” a client’s situation, or frustration with a client who is not meeting the provider’s expectations. However, these stressors may be magnified for an HIV peer worker, who is dealing not only with the client’s medical, psychological, and social needs, but must also cope with the way HIV impacts his or her own life.
2. Introduce the exercise as one which will give peers an opportunity to discuss some of the stressors they experience on the job and to identify ways they have found to cope with them.
3. Break the group into smaller groups.
4. Instruct each group to refer to the list of discussion questions on the newsprint. Ask them to discuss each question in their small groups and have someone record the responses on newsprint. Assign someone to report back responses to the group. Give the groups 20 minutes to complete the exercise.
5. Have groups share their responses to each of the questions in turn. (Refer to the “List of Stressors” cheat sheet to expand discussion on certain topics.)

Summary

To wrap up the exercise, ask for any other suggestions participants may have for their peers in meeting their own needs for care and support and hand out Stressors sheet. Remind participants that it is important to address stress as soon as possible and to work to fit in time for themselves.

* This module is part of the online toolkit Building Blocks to Peer Success. For more information, visit http://www.hdwg.org/peer_center/training_toolkit.

This module comes from the Comprehensive Peer Worker Training, Peer Advanced Competency Training (PACT) Project Harlem Hospital Center, Division of Infectious Diseases, 2008.

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SESSION NEWSPRINT

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What are some of the mental health stressors you experience as an HIV peer worker?
2. How do these stressors affect your own health and well-being?
3. What resources or social support systems do you use to help you cope with these stressors?

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SESSION HANDOUT

LIST OF STRESSORS

- Grief at losing a client
- Over-identification with patients
- Stigma
Stigma is thought by some to be the single most important factor in producing and reinforcing the negative psychological and social impact of HIV/AIDS
- A feeling of powerlessness at being unable to “fix” the client’s situation.
- Frustration or anger when the client does not meet the peer’s expectations (refer to Stages of Change” theory).
- Anger at clients who do not disclose their status and/or knowingly expose others to HIV
- Hopelessness at their inability to affect behavior change in their client (refer to “Stages of Change” theory)
- Frustration at insufficient resources and unlimited needs of clients
- Feeling overwhelmed by high case loads and inadequate staffing
- Burnout created by excessive emotional demands of job

Burnout is not uncommon among HIV service providers and should be addressed as soon as possible to avoid more serious manifestations of stress, which can include:
physical symptoms, such as:

- exhaustion
- headaches
- back pain
- sleeplessness
- malaise
- gastrointestinal problems

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SESSION HANDOUT (cont.)

LIST OF STRESSORS (CONT.)

behavioral symptoms, such as:

- becoming easily irritated and angry
- increased alcohol/drug use - relapse
- marital/relationship problems
- inflexibility in problem-solving
- impulsivity and acting out
- withdrawal from non-colleagues

cognitive and emotional symptoms, such as:

- emotional numbness or hypersensitivity
- over-identification with clients
- grief and sadness
- pessimism and hopelessness
- cynicism
- indecision and inattention
- depression