

Supporting Workforce Participation of IPS Clients who have HIV/AIDS

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Hello, my name is Dr. Lisa Razzano. I am Associate Professor of Psychiatry at the Center on Mental Health Services Research and Policy in the Department of Psychiatry at the University of Illinois at Chicago. Today I'm addressing key areas for supporting workforce participation among people living with mental illness and HIV. I'll discuss some of the main employment challenges they face. I'll also share tips that IPS staff can use to help them find and keep jobs.

The good news is that, because of advanced treatments, people with HIV are now living longer, healthier lives. As a result, many have hope for assuming normative community roles that once seemed impossible, including rejoining the workforce. Yet, as you can imagine, managing HIV in addition to mental illness can make looking for and maintaining a job difficult. Some of these challenges will sound very familiar to you, since they're also experienced by IPS clients who aren't managing HIV. Other employment challenges, however, are unique to or magnified by having HIV.

One of the first challenges to consider is that, regardless of a pre-existing mental health condition, it's common for people with HIV to develop symptoms of depression and anxiety. These mental health symptoms can arise due to having a compromised immune system, societal discrimination, and the overwhelming nature of self-managing HIV. If clients with HIV have pre-existing depression or anxiety, you'll want to help them carefully monitor whether their mental health symptoms are getting worse or more disabling. Advise them to work with a mental health professional to ensure the best management of their depression and anxiety, since either can be intensified by their infection. Additionally, as they think about what types of work they'd like to do, people with HIV need to consider whether the ups and downs of a given job might increase their feelings of depression or anxiety. You also can help your clients with HIV to recognize that difficulty sleeping, fatigue, and headaches are early warning signs of heightened stress, which can be harmful to their immune systems. Once identified, they can use certain strategies called wellness tools to manage their stress and avoid deterioration of their physical or mental health. Wellness tools might include calling a friend or counselor, scheduling a medication checkup, taking walks, or watching a favorite movie after work. Their wellness tools will be personal to them, but it's very important for people with HIV to manage their stress. So talk to your clients about what wellness tools might be helpful, and encourage them to use these tools when work gets stressful.

You may not know this, but people living with HIV must consistently monitor the strength of their immune systems. Because their immune health is compromised, they can experience a significant lack of energy that may undermine workplace performance and attendance. The vulnerability of their immune systems also means that they need IPS staff to help them plan for healthy eating and exercise routines, including when they're on the job.

Additionally, many people will have complicated medication regimes that have to be planned for during a regular workday. They might need access to a refrigerator for certain medications. They might need to keep their phones with them at work to receive electronic reminders to take their medications. Some people may need to have back-up doses available if they have to work longer hours unexpectedly. Some people with HIV experience gastrointestinal side effects from their antiretroviral medications. In these cases, you'll want to encourage people to ask their doctors whether another HIV medication could better support their work goals, or whether something else could help, like taking an anti-acid along with the HIV dosage. Finally, it's helpful to remember that many workers manage long-term medical conditions like diabetes or hypertension, which also can require taking medications or monitoring health indicators at work. So, IPS staff can draw on this when helping employers to understand that accommodating HIV isn't all that unusual.

Workers with HIV and mental illness also are vulnerable to decreases in overall productivity. Some may feel irritable or emotionally numb, making it harder for them to enjoy working. They also may have trouble performing their job tasks, engaging in problem-solving, or concentrating. Difficulties with memory or cognition may negatively impact their work accuracy. They may also avoid their co-workers or conflict that can arise during decision-making, which prevents them from being successful at teamwork. On top of this, they may need to manage multiple medical and counseling appointments during the workweek, which requires a flexible schedule and supportive supervisor. Therefore, when developing career profiles, you'll want to help them consider whether they experience these common cognitive and emotional difficulties, and if so, what types of work might be best. For example, starting a small dog-walking or hair-braiding business may help them to augment their income and build their resumes, while simultaneously avoiding some of the challenges presented by their medications and side effects. Or, perhaps they would like to consider learning to be a peer recovery support specialist, helping others who share their experiences of co-managing mental illness and HIV infection.

As is often the case for your other clients, past or current substance use disorders are also common among people living with HIV. Some people acquired their HIV infection through substance use, and many workplaces offer opportunities for drinking alcohol at after-work events or office parties. You'll want to help your clients be alert to the possibility of being triggered or tempted at these events. They'll benefit from rehearsing with you how to respond when offered alcohol or drugs. They may want to consider attending these events with a sponsor or friend who can help them manage their sobriety. That way they won't have to miss out on social networking opportunities and having fun with co-workers.

Like many adults with disabilities, people living with HIV are often concerned about how working will affect their public benefits and financial resources. Historically, people with HIV have had a difficult time obtaining private health insurance and have been particularly vulnerable to insurance industry changes. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, fewer than one in five people with HIV has private insurance, and nearly 30% do not have any coverage. Thus, many individuals with HIV have relied on the Affordable Care Act for coverage or eligibility through expanded Medicaid support. Because they are vulnerable to a lack of insurance coverage, they may be even more cautious than most IPS clients about whether

working will affect their access to health care. They may be especially worried about whether their work-related health insurance coverage will remain in effect during times of illness. If your team is unfamiliar with how to resolve these unique issues, you can start by reaching out to your local government office for people with disabilities or the office of workplace development, along with any community legal aid clinics that are familiar with HIV and AIDS. These programs can address questions about HIV employment policies and protections, which vary by state.

IPS teams are certainly familiar with the stigma and discrimination associated with mental illness. Adding HIV into the mix makes this stigma and discrimination even greater. Many employees avoid disclosing that they are HIV-positive for fear of being rejected by their co-workers or even fired. Hiding health needs at work can lead to added stress, which usually makes symptoms worse. Also, when workers avoid discussing how health-related issues may impact their work, employers are prevented from fully understanding the overall wellness needs of their workforce. As IPS staff, you'll be working with each client to discuss whether, when, and how to disclose their mental illness and/or their HIV to employers. Also during the job development phase, you will help clients to identify whether there are workplaces that welcome diversity and work with or hire others who are living with HIV.

Speaking of supportive workplaces, you'll also want to familiarize yourself with the kinds of reasonable accommodations that workers with HIV commonly request. You'll want to tell your clients that, if HIV or its treatment restricts them in some way, they're considered by law to have a functional limitation and may qualify for a reasonable accommodation. One such accommodation arises from the gastrointestinal impact of certain HIV medications, as I mentioned earlier. At work, these symptoms can be managed with approval for later arrival times, more frequent bathroom breaks, or being located close to restrooms. Accommodations for the fatigue that often accompanies HIV include periodic rest breaks, flexible work stations that allow for sitting, or job sharing and telework arrangements. Some of the cognitive issues that I described earlier might be accommodated with use of written instructions for job tasks, the use of reminder apps to keep on top of deadlines, and refresher job training. It's important for you and your clients to know two key facts. One is that it's illegal to fire people solely because they have HIV. Second, workers do not have to disclose their HIV even when requesting an accommodation. Accommodations that are supported by doctor's notes can simply state that the employee has an immune disorder. However, workers still must be able to perform their main job duties with accommodation. If they cannot, then it's probably time to request a leave or look for a job with a better fit. This is something for IPS staff to explore with clients whose symptoms and side effects are making work too difficult, and putting undue stress on their immune systems.

We have found that people living with HIV and mental illness often benefit from peer support, just like people living with other long-term medical or mental health conditions. Peers who have been there can provide not only emotional support, but practical tips about what has worked for them or others. They also can role play with clients how to request a reasonable accommodation for their immune disorder, or engage in mock job interviews to increase clients' skills and confidence.

Before I end, I'd like to acknowledge one of our local providers, called Chicago House and Social Services Agency. They developed a pioneering supported employment program for clients living with HIV after working on a federally-funded employment research study with me. Employment staff there found the strategies I shared today to be effective when supporting their clients' work aspirations. You can learn more by visiting their web site at: www.chicagohouse.org.

Announcer: Thank you for listening. You can obtain additional recordings, or download a transcript, by visiting the Illinois Supported Employment Transformation Initiative web site.