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LIVING WELL WITH HIV: IT'S IN YOUR CONTROL

Trish Thompson

Trish Thompson has more than 22 years of experience in counselling and psychotherapy and is a guest presenter at the Phoenix workshop for newly diagnosed at Living Positive Victoria.

In this article Trish Thompson highlights the value of social connection. Both local haemophilia foundations and HIV organisations such as Living Positive Victoria work hard to provide peer support activities to their members and to offer environments for them to connect with each other. Anth McCarthy, peer support worker at Living Positive Victoria and a man living with HIV and haemophilia, talked to HFA about what this has meant to him:

'In recent years I've had the great pleasure of connecting with other men with haemophilia who, like me, acquired HIV in the 1980s. Thank you Haemophilia Foundation Victoria for enabling that to happen. I got to hear how they have managed the same challenges and overcome the same hurdles I faced. Gaining an appreciation for their many different successes beyond simply surviving has deepened my own sense of worth and accomplishment and given me a sense of belonging to a very unique and special community.'

Living with HIV in 2018 tends to mean being as physically healthy as the general population.

But it can still feel like a daunting prospect to have to manage a health condition in such an on-going way, especially when there are parts of the community - including some health professionals—that still lack an understanding of HIV. Stress and encountering stigma can contribute to a number of health problems.

So what can be done to stay on top of things?

TAKING CARE OF MIND AND BODY

We now know more about the mind-body connection, or that our minds and bodies work in partnership and influence one another to help us live well. Remember the last time you had a bad cold or flu? Everything seems so much worse when we feel sick! And when we recover it's like the sun has come out again. The good news is that there are lots of strategies that we can put in place that can keep the sun shining. Having a balanced diet and exercising regularly are brilliant ways to take care of both mind and body alike. But there are some things we can do that particularly target our mental health.

SOCIAL CONNECTION

How we experience human contact 'in the real world' has a big impact on our health and wellbeing. While researching this article, I came across a TED talk in which psychologist Susan Pinker presents research listing factors that predict living a long life. She visited a village in Sardinia, which has the highest rate of people who live to over 100 years.



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Surprisingly, breathing clean air, having high blood pressure treated or being lean as opposed to overweight are quite low on the list.

The predictive factor that topped the list was social connectedness.

This is about talking to our neighbours, to the person who makes our coffee or smiling at the other person walking their dog. It is about being in a book club or showing up to the local primary school fete. It’s catching up with friends in person, not just on Facebook. Pinker explains that simply making eye contact with somebody is enough to release oxytocin and lower your cortisol levels. This means a boost to mood and a decrease in stress.

And what about the Sardinians referred to in the TED talk? They lived in tight-knit communities, never going a day without human contact.

DECLUTTERING OUR MINDS

With the ubiquitous smart phone in all of our pockets, our minds don’t get much of a break.

We can be engaged by thousands of bits of information every day. Sounds great, but increasingly my clients are saying that they think their minds need a rest. The thing we might use to ‘have some down time’ can also actually over stimulate our brains. Our minds can get loaded up, not only by lots of external information but also by our reactions to this information. For example, we might see something on social media and then we can start thinking about how everyone else is having more fun.

So when I think about looking after our mental health, I’m not just thinking about things like getting help for issues like anxiety and depression. Of course this is also very important. I’m thinking about allowing our minds to have some free time. To daydream, or meditate or notice what is going on in the here and now. To go to the park with the dog and actually see the grass and trees. To hop on the train and notice the expressions on the faces of fellow travelers. To feel the sunshine on our faces or hear the birds call out to one another in the morning. In other words, to be more present. You might have heard about this thing called ‘mindfulness’. It is mostly about living our lives in real time, to be connected to what is happening around us. Being mindful more often creates space in our brain. And it is OK not to fill that space.

BRINGING IT ALL TOGETHER

Given we all can’t move to the Mediterranean, what is the take home message? It is that isolation is not good for us. I have heard many of my clients living with HIV say that at times they feel that the stigma that still exists (but less so thanks to the tireless educational work of many) forces them to retreat. And so we talk about venturing back into the world, and finding those connections, whether they are at work, with family or maybe through a community-based organisation such as Living Positive Victoria.

So consider finding some opportunities to be present to the world you live in, and connect with others in person, not just online. Your mental and physical health will thank you for it.

Susan Pinker’s TED talk ‘The secret to living longer may be your social life’ can be found at www.ted.com. ■