Coping with feelings and stress

Being close to a PLHA or living with them can be stressful. You need to think about the things you can do to help yourself cope with stress.

- Carry on doing the things you enjoy – these will help you relax and restore your energy levels.
- Talk to friends or others in similar situations. Get counselling for yourself if you need to. Think about joining a support group for family members or friends, if there is one. Get help from the health services or NGOs.
- If there are no services to help you or PLHAs cope mentally and emotionally, you and others in the same situation may need to persuade the health services to offer the necessary mental health care.

Doing these kinds of things will help you cope and go on giving support to the infected person you know.

Information for family, friends and other people giving support to people living with HIV/AIDS including people on anti-retroviral treatment (ARVs)

If a PLHA is finding it difficult to cope, here are some helpful things family and friends or other supporters can do:

- Learn as much as you can about HIV infection and ARVs.
- Help others to understand that anyone can get HIV/AIDS. It does not help to blame PLHAs for what has happened to them.
- Be there for the person – to listen, to support, and to encourage him or her to fight against HIV/AIDS.
- Make time to do things together – or just to talk.
- Remember it’s not up to you to make decisions about who should be told about the illness of the person you are supporting.
- Encourage the person to join a support group, if there is one. Talking about problems with other PLHAs often makes the person feel better.
- Sometimes PLHAs develop more serious mental or emotional problems. You should be concerned if you notice that the person is not eating properly, is tense or depressed, has difficulty thinking clearly or is not sleeping well and these signs continue for more than a few weeks. Encourage the person to see a health worker and to take any medication that is prescribed to help him or her cope.
It can be very worrying if a friend or family member or someone you know is a person living with HIV/AIDS (PLHA). You want to provide support (and you need to) but you're not always sure what to do. Perhaps you share some of the concerns these people are talking about:

Having HIV/AIDS and being on ARVs is hard for PLHAs — and for all those giving them support. Why?

- HIV infection can be treated, but there is no cure for it yet. It is not easy to keep feeling strong when you know this fact.
- Having HIV makes it difficult to plan for the future, especially when there are children to be looked after.
- Many people think that PLHAs are to blame for getting infected. They may criticise and avoid them — and also their family and friends or others connected with them.
- Many PLHAs feel they have to hide the fact that they are HIV positive. Keeping the secret is stressful for them and those supporting them.
- HIV infection can change how PLHAs behave and relate to others. They may seem irritable, depressed or want to be left alone. They may turn to alcohol or drugs. These changes can make those supporting them feel hurt or angry.
- The medicines used to fight HIV/AIDS are called ARVs. For them to work properly PLHAs have to take them exactly as told and they can’t just stop — ever. It is hard for those supporting them to know how to encourage but not to interfere.
- Some ARVs have unpleasant side effects. They may make people feel sick, tired or tense, and may make it difficult to think clearly.
- ARVs sometimes don’t work how they are supposed to, or as well as they did in the past. If a PLHA has to change to other ARVs, it’s stressful for everyone.