Group Therapy Can Improve Viral Load in HIV

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MARCO ISLAND, F LA. — Semistruc-
tured group therapy improves mood state in HIV-positive men, which improves cor-
tis levels and immune function and thereby reduces viral load, Karl Goodkin, M.D., said at the annual meeting of the Academy of Psychosomatic Medicine.

Bereavement outside of HIV has long been known to be associated with im-
munosuppression. Bereavement is also as-
sociated with increased mortality risk for
surviving partners. The risk increases 40% for the first 6 months and 10-fold in the first year, the same time frame as observed decrements in the immune system, said Dr. Goodkin, professor of psychiatry and be-
havioral sciences, neurology, and psychol-
yogy at the University of Miami.

In a randomized controlled trial, Dr. Goodkin and his colleagues compared the presence of overall psychological distress in HIV-posi-
tive and HIV-negative gay men who had experienced a loss in the previous 6 months. Although effects of grief were similar, the two-tier group intervention decreased overall psychological stress—which improved mood and immune mea-
sures, including CD4 counts and viral loads—and reduced physician health vis-
tis, compared with the usual-care control group.

Participants attended a 90-minute ses-
tion once weekly for 10 weeks. The
participants was smaller, compared with HIV-
positive and HIV-negative group ses-
tions. “HIV-positive groups talked more about concerns around their own mortal-
ity, but nonetheless it is important to note the consistency in findings across multiple domains, especially the physical domains,” Dr. Goodkin said.

That suggests that if you improve mood state, you will improve cortisol, and you will improve immune function, which relates to improvements in viral load,” he said.

PTSD Rate Highest in First Months After Brain Injury

MARCO ISLAND, F LA. — Posttrau-
matic stress disorder is not uncommon af-
ter moderate to severe traumatic brain in-
jury, Jesse R. Fann, M.D., said at the annual meeting of the Academy of Psychoso-
matic Medicine.

Many people experience anxiety after
moderate-to-severe traumatic brain injury. Because both brain injury and dissociation from posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) can impair declarative memory, the true occurrence of PTSD remains controver-
sial, noted Dr. Fann, director of the psy-
chiatry and psychology consultation ser-
vise at the Seattle Cancer Care Alliance.

In a 6-month prospective follow-up study, Dr. Fann and his colleagues assessed 124 patients admitted to Harborview Med-
ical Center in Seattle following traumatic brain injury to determine the incidence of PTSD, the risk factors, and how PTSD symptoms manifest in this population.

Researchers performed monthly assess-
ments with the PTSD Checklist-Civilian Version, the Global Health Questionnaire, and the Self Reported Health Status (SF-
1) instruments. The first month had the highest incidence of PTSD, about 13%. “A lot of the PTSD may not be prolonged, lasting 1-3 months,” Dr. Fann said.

Patients with lower levels of education and those injured in an assault were sig-
nificantly more likely to meet criteria for
the disorder. Participants who met PTSD criteria most commonly reported feeling sad when recalling aspects of the event and feeling cut off from others, jumpy, hyper-
vigilant, and irritable. Sleep disturbances were also common, he said.

The investigators looked at PTSD symp-
tom clusters and found arousal symptoms in 23% of assessments over the 6 months. They also found intrusive symptoms in 20% and avoidance and numbing in 8%.

“There is a significant overlap of other comorbid psychiatric disorders, such as anxiety and depression, that can present a diagnostic challenge,” Dr. Fann said.

“The overlap of PTSD and traumatic brain injury symptoms.”

The researchers also assessed patients for major depressive disorder, panic dis-
order, and other anxiety disorders. PTSD was significantly associated with current major depression, any other anxiety dis-
order, a blood alcohol level greater than 0.08, and a psychiatric history, according to a univariate analysis. A logistic regression analysis showed that people with a histo-
ry of PTSD reported significantly in-
creased functional impairment compared with those without PTSD.

The study was funded by the National Institutes of Health’s National Center for Medical Rehabilitation Research.

—Damian McNamara