



# Modification Of Therapy Techniques When Managing PLWHA's With Cognitive Impairment

This fact sheet is to assist people who are doing therapy with PLWHA's with cognitive impairment.

People with HIV/AIDS are susceptible to emotional distress, just as those who are HIV negative. In the event that a client presents with HIV associated cognitive impairment, it may be necessary to modify some therapy techniques.

While severity of impairment may vary, people with HIV associated cognitive impairment usually present with one or more of the following features:

- "Slowness" of thought (e.g., people may need more time to complete tasks or respond to questions).
- Reduced capacity to concentrate (e.g., people may have difficulty focussing or maintaining full attention in conversations and/or written language).
- Reduced memory capacity and/or forgetfulness (e.g. people may lose their train of thought in mid sentence, become increasingly absent minded or have difficulty recalling information).
- Impaired abstracting ability.
- Impaired problem solving ability.

## Modifications

Some of the following suggestions may be useful when conducting therapy with a client with HIV associated cognitive impairment.

- Ensure sessions are as structured as possible. Establish careful goals at the outset of therapy and continue to orient the client to these as sessions progress. Ensure consistency of session structure from week to week and try to have the sessions at the same place and same time each week.
- Allow for "slowness" of thought by providing adequate time to make a response, answer questions or complete a task. Avoid interruptions but provide prompts or encourage an individual if he/she appears hesitant or if you suspect he/she may have neglected to mention something of importance. It may be useful to fire a "warning shot" in this instance (e.g., "A lot of people find it difficult to cope with X. How do you cope in this situation?").
- Allow for reduced capacity to concentrate by increasing the number of breaks within a session or shortening the length of a session (e.g., 30 minutes instead of 60). Reduce distractions (e.g., noise) when providing new information and ensure the information is presented in a manner that is clear, simple and logical.
- Provide all new information in small amounts. If possible, write down new information as you provide it (e.g., on a whiteboard). Encourage rehearsal of new information. Write down all instructions, rationales and homework and consider providing handouts in relation to major ideas discussed in sessions. Aim for one main idea each session. By using these techniques you maximise the amount of information clients recall between sessions.
- If requiring clients to complete a certain number of exercises per day and/or exercises at a certain time of day, consider pairing the exercises with a task and/or establishing situations that may prompt the client. For example, a cue card with the word "relax" could be placed inside the cellophane of a packet of cigarettes, to remind them to practice their relaxation exercises.
- Reduce abstract concepts as much as possible and explain all strategies in concrete terms. Consider substituting cognitive challenging exercises with (1) reality testing in an "in-vivo" situation, (2) recalling quick, personalised coping statements (e.g., "I've done this before, I



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know I can do it again") in emotionally distressing situations or (3) distraction exercises (e.g., mentally telling themselves "Stop thinking about this now!" and then counting backwards from 100 by 3s or reciting the alphabet backwards, breathing deeply).

- Encourage structured problem solving to counter any difficulty clients have in using initiative, instigating strategies to deal with problems and planning solutions.

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Encourage participation of partner/carer/significant other as much as possible. These people can aid in providing support and structure, especially for clients with disorganised behaviour. They can also prompt clients to do homework exercises and can help provide feedback in relation to client progress.