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Guest:	Octaviana Hemmy Asamsama
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Dr. Colleen Becket-Davenport:

Welcome to the PTSD Bytes podcast, where we talk to experts about post-traumatic stress disorder and mental health, and how technology like mobile mental health apps can help. This is your host, Dr. Colleen Becket-Davenport, clinical psychologist at the Veterans Affairs National Center for PTSD.

Dr. Colleen Becket-Davenport:

On today's episode, we'll be talking about PTSD and HIV. I'm joined by Dr. Octaviana Hemmy, who is an integrated health psychologist and a section chief of addiction services at the San Diego VA Healthcare System. She's also the national coordinator for the HIV and Liver Disease Psychology Postdoctoral Fellowship Program at the VA. Welcome, Dr. Hemmy.

Dr. Hemmy:

Thank you for having me. Grateful to be here.

Dr. Colleen Becket-Davenport:

Before we get into today's topic, I would love to learn a little bit more about your role at VA. So for those who aren't familiar, what is an integrated health psychologist?

Dr. Hemmy:

An integrated health psychologist is someone who is a part of a medical team that is comprised of variety of doctors, nurses, sometimes social workers, to make sure that patients don't have to go to as many clinics. And if we're talking about Veterans with HIV, having an integrated health psychologist can help Veterans with their unique needs. For example, many Veterans with HIV can experience stigma related to having an HIV diagnosis. And I've worked with a variety of Veterans, for example, helping them disclose their diagnosis with people or maybe navigate challenges of being in a partnership with somebody who's HIV negative. And really the goal of integrated health psychologist is to treat the whole person and make mental health accessible for everyone.

Dr. Colleen Becket-Davenport:

So now diving into today's topic, HIV and PTSD, what is HIV and how does someone get it?

Dr. Hemmy:

HIV is identified as human immunodeficiency virus, attacks cells that can help the body fight infections. So, when someone has HIV, it makes them vulnerable to other diseases because the cells that help fight infection are weakened by the HIV virus. So, it's really important that someone knows when they have their virus, by getting diagnosed. And also, to take medication to make sure that the number of virus in your body is low, because the higher number of virus, the more chances they have to attack your immune system. And additionally, if someone has a high virus count and they engage in risky behaviors like having unprotected sex or sharing drug equipment like syringes, needles or pipes, they might

accidentally transmit the virus to other people that they're sharing the drug equipment or engaging in unprotected sex with.

Dr. Colleen Becket-Davenport:

And what do we know about HIV in a Veteran population? Are the rates of HIV higher among Veterans compared to civilians? And if so, why?

Dr. Hemmy:

Unfortunately, the rates of HIV are higher among the Veteran population. There are often higher rates of trauma history, sometimes substance use, and housing challenges. These Veterans are at greater risk for socioeconomic stressors that can increase your chances of engaging other risky behaviors like having unprotected sex or engaging in drug use where you share drug equipment. That's part of the reason why Veteran population might be at higher risk.

Dr. Colleen Becket-Davenport:

And how does having PTSD affect the risks of contracting HIV?

Dr. Hemmy:

That's a really interesting question. Somebody with PTSD might be more likely to engage in behaviors that are a little bit risky compared to somebody who does not have PTSD. And these risky behaviors can increase your risk for contracting HIV. So, it's really important to be mindful of why you're engaging in risky behaviors and think about ways of reducing your risk for transmission. Part of the way that you can address the core issues of risky behaviors, especially if you have PTSD, is to get evidence-based treatment for PTSD. Also, discussing your risky behaviors with your treatment care providers, whether that is your mental health provider or your primary care doctor, and be transparent with the different things that you're doing right now that would put you at risk.

Dr. Colleen Becket-Davenport:

And on the flip side, how does an HIV diagnosis affect one's mental health? Is there a relationship between an HIV diagnosis and developing PTSD?

Dr. Hemmy:

In the past, an HIV diagnosis was delivered as if you have a life-ending event. So, for some, this can be experienced as very traumatic and stressful. Veterans with HIV also can have multiple traumas from childhood. So having an HIV diagnosis can be experienced as an isolating event and they can experience social stigma. And often having the diagnosis can reinforce these foundational negative self-worth that because of their childhood and adult experiences. So, because of this, rates of depressions are also higher in this population.

Dr. Colleen Becket-Davenport:

You've also mentioned substance use a few times. Now, I understand that you were involved in some research that found that Veterans living with HIV were more likely to have substance use disorders compared to their counterparts. What would you say is the reason behind this?

Dr. Hemmy:

We found that rates of Veterans using illicit substances was about 20% higher in the population of Veterans living with HIV compared to the Veterans that do not have HIV. And there are a couple of reasons behind this. Part of that could include history of substance use before their diagnosis, they might also struggle with other mental health conditions like PTSD and depression and also, they might have limited income or they're currently or they haven't learned the skills to manage stressors in a healthy way. For some, drugs and alcohol might be their oldest and most reliable friend. It's tougher for them to let go of this friend. And part of our goal as mental health providers is to build trust that they don't have to rely on this unhelpful tool and start to teach them healthier coping skills to manage some real-life complex issues that's really tough to navigate.

Dr. Colleen Becket-Davenport:

You've spoken a little bit about treatment. Are there any special considerations for PTSD treatment for people living with HIV? I'm wondering if their treatment would look different than someone without HIV.

Dr. Hemmy:

Personally, I think for a lot of people it's tough to understand the mental load of having a chronic illness. And that's what HIV really is. You are fighting a virus that's in your body and you have to take medications on a daily basis to make sure that the virus is low, and that can be really taxing. So, it's really helpful to work with a team that have specialized training who understand what they go through. And for me, some of the things that I've assisted Veterans with includes completing trauma-focused treatment during the HIV clinic visit, so they don't have to feel anxiety about disclosing their HIV diagnosis with somebody who might not be familiar with HIV and HIV care. We've also consulted with other doctors and explained why a Veteran might be reluctant to take their medication because taking their medication might be a trigger for the trauma that caused them to have HIV.

Dr. Colleen Becket-Davenport:

It sounds like in some ways you almost serve as an intermediary between medical professionals and Veterans, and that you talk with Veterans about their health issues and their diagnoses, but also speak with medical professionals on behalf of the Veteran to explain why they may be more reluctant to take medication. So that's a really unique role.

Dr. Hemmy:

Yes. I do have to advocate sometimes with healthcare providers because they have a panel of Veterans and if someone's not doing well, they really want to help them. But sometimes taking a step back or offering a different perspective to the provider can help them see why they don't want to take their medication, why it's easier for them to, to drink versus to take trauma-focused treatment.

Dr. Colleen Becket-Davenport:

And along those same lines, do you have any other tips for providers who are working with people with PTSD and HIV?

Dr. Hemmy:

Sometimes I think providers forget how challenging it is to struggle with things like HIV and PTSD and really having empathy with Veterans and knowing that they're just trying to do their best day in and day out can help improve adherence, improve your frustration, burnout, and just overall treatment outcome. The Veteran can sense that, and they know when you accept them, when you want to do your best with them. And when there are challenging behaviors that are detrimental to their health, utilizing techniques like motivational interviewing can help facilitate change.

Dr. Colleen Becket-Davenport:

Such a good point, and of course we are a technology podcast. So what are some digital resources that you might recommend to support people with HIV and PTSD or, or other mental health concerns?

Dr. Hemmy:

The VA provides extremely outstanding resources. There are a variety of VA PTSD apps and apps like Mindfulness Coach. There's also training that the VA provides for parenting resources through Veterantraining.va.gov. What we want is for a Veteran to build a life that they enjoy doing, that they enjoy living, so that some of these unhealthy things they were engaging before, they don't have to rely on that anymore and that they're living the life that they want to live.

Dr. Colleen Becket-Davenport:

Such an important point. That's all we have time for today. Thank you so much for joining us, Dr. Hemmy.

Dr. Hemmy:

Thank you. Lovely to be here.

Dr. Colleen Becket-Davenport:

And as a reminder to our listeners, they can find more information about mindfulness coach and other apps for PTSD at www.ptsd.va.gov/mobile.

Dr. Andrea Jamison:

Hello, this is Andrea Jamison and I'm the executive producer of the PTSD Bytes podcast. Catch new episodes by following or subscribing to PTSD Bytes on your preferred podcast app. Show notes and more information are on our website, www.pts.va.gov/podcast. Thank you for joining us.