

# Let's talk about mental health

Integrating care for depression, anxiety, and substance use as part of HIV services in Vietnam



Mental health service information and promotion from doctors and health staff at Glink one-stop shop clinic leverages Glink's new "Your Space" campaign.

People at risk for or living with HIV have an elevated risk of mental health morbidities. Poor mental health among these key populations can reduce quality of life and impact care seeking, adherence to and continuation of antiretroviral therapy (ART) and pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP)—two critical interventions for treating and preventing HIV. Seeing this gap in successful HIV care, the U.S. Agency for International Development/PATH Healthy Markets project sought to make mental health care more accessible for people at risk for or living with HIV.

Since 2015, the Healthy Markets project has worked with communities and community organizations to support the design and implementation of person-centered health care services among key populations in Vietnam. These activities included offering patient-led HIV and sexually transmitted infection testing, viral

hepatitis services, PrEP, post-exposure prophylaxis (PEP), ART, and gender affirming care; and, most recently, cultivation of integrative, one-stop shop (OSS) key population-led and key population-friendly clinics. Mental health care was first integrated into these clinics in 2019 and has since expanded in scope and scale. Healthy Markets applied a multi-step process to initiate the provision of mental health services at OSSs:

1. **Performed mental health needs assessments** at five key population-led clinics which identified a significant demand from clients for support with managing depression, anxiety, and substance use.
2. **Conducted baseline trainings** for OSS and community-based organizations (CBOs) staff to develop competencies in screening for mental health morbidity, triaging symptoms, and referring patients to specialist care when needed.
3. **Developed screening tools and standard operating procedures** for screening clients, including use of the Depression, Anxiety and Stress Scale (DASS-21).
4. **Updated the OSS service package and client flow guidelines** to include mental health service provision.
5. **Delivered continuous refresher trainings** to health staff to strengthen their capacity to reach, counsel, screen, and treat clients for mental health illness.

CBOs often serve as a point of entry for clients seeking HIV and HIV-related health services. Outreach workers at CBOs provide counselling for clients to determine their mental health and health service needs before referring them to OSS services for further care. There, trained service providers screen clients for depression, anxiety, substance abuse, and suicide risk, using a stepped care approach to then link clients to appropriate services.

Clients are triaged based on the results of their mental health screening. Clients with mild mental health symptoms are provided with supportive counseling and psychoeducation as needed. Those with moderate levels of anxiety, depression, and substance abuse problems are offered basic evidence-based mental health care from trained providers in the clinic, including psychoeducation, relaxation, behavior activation, and problem solving cognitive-behavioral interventions. Clients with severe mental health problems are referred to expert psychiatric care, while continuing to receive supportive counseling and services at the OSS clinic.

In just eight months, more than 1,700 key population clients were linked to mental health services at five Healthy Markets-supported OSS sites. Many of these clients were initially seeking HIV prevention and testing services but were also screened for mental health morbidity and offered tailored care and follow-up, such as 33-year-old Dung:

Glink provides more services than I had originally thought. I initially came to Glink for HIV testing and prevention support. During my appointment, I received counselling and realized that I was overly anxious about HIV and my health. A



*A client receives mental health counselling at Glink in Ho Chi Minh City, one of the five private clinics that Healthy Markets supports to implement a one-stop shop integrated care model. Photo: Glink Vietnam.*

counsellor supported me to process my thoughts and emotions to help me stay confident while preventing HIV.

Healthy Markets supports OSS partners to maximize footfall at their clinics through the co-creation and co-implementation of tailored demand generation activities, such as Glink clinic's "Your Space" campaign promoting mental health services at its District 10 OSS in Ho Chi Minh City. In the coming months, Glink will further diversify its services and extend care options by offering group counselling sessions on the weekends.

Mental health group consultation is a service that we will soon be implementing. Based on feedback from our current clients, we found that many key populations are facing the same issues and are in need of someone who can listen.

– Le Minh Thanh, CEO of Glink, an OSS clinic committed to scaling up mental health service provision.

Evidence suggests that mental health issues can lead to negative outcomes for people living with HIV at all points in the continuum of care.<sup>a</sup> Experiences at OSS clinics validate the need to expand and scale up integrative mental health and HIV care. Between October 2020 and May 2021, 1,013 OSS clients were diagnosed with a mental health illness, which is over half (58.5 percent) of the total 1,733 clients receiving mental health screening services during this period. Across all groups whose mental health status were assessed, PrEP clients with mental health morbidity were at 16.7 greater odds of dropping out of PrEP (measured at month 3), compared to PrEP clients without mental health issues. PrEP continuation rate at this point was exceptionally high among clients with no reported mental health issues at 93.1 percent, compared to only 45.5 percent among clients with mental health issues.

Reducing HIV incidence will require addressing mental health and underlying barriers to care seeking, adherence, and continuation. By integrating mental health with other HIV services, we can provide better support for key populations wherever they are in seeking HIV care. Healthy Markets will continue leveraging models of integrative primary health care that meet the physical and psychosocial needs of key population clients, reinforce health promotion on a broad scale, and facilitate the rollout of more person-centered and effective health care approaches.



*Glink's counselling room at its OSS clinic in Ho Chi Minh City offers a safe and inviting space to clients seeking mental health support. Photo: PATH.*

<sup>a</sup> [https://journals.lww.com/aidsonline/fulltext/2019/07150/mental\\_health\\_and\\_hiv\\_aids\\_\\_the\\_need\\_for\\_an.1.aspx](https://journals.lww.com/aidsonline/fulltext/2019/07150/mental_health_and_hiv_aids__the_need_for_an.1.aspx)