



Mental Health Issues among Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender (GLBT) People

According to the National Institute on Mental Health, an estimated 26% of adults 18 and older, or 1 in 4 Americans, experience a mental illness in a given year.¹ Just like everyone else, gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender (GLBT) people also experience mental illnesses.

First and foremost, however, we must remember that **being** gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender **is not** a mental illness in and of itself. Just because someone is GLBT doesn't automatically mean that they will experience a mental illness. According to the American Psychological Association:

*"Homosexuality per se implies no impairment in judgment, stability, reliability, or general social and vocational capabilities. Further, the American Psychological Association urges all mental health professionals to take the lead in removing the stigma of mental illness that has long been associated with homosexual orientations."*²

However, GLBT people may face unique risks to their mental health and well-being, which mental health providers should be aware of.

Most research suggests that GLBT people are likely to be at higher risk for depression, anxiety, and substance use disorders.³⁻⁵ One study found that **GLB groups are about two-and-one-half times more likely than heterosexual men and women to have had a mental health disorder**, such as those related to mood, anxiety, or substance use, in their lifetime.⁴

In a national study comparing GLB and heterosexual groups, researchers found that gay and bisexual men were more likely to report major depression and panic disorder in the previous twelve month period. Lesbian and bisexual women were more than three times as likely to have experienced generalized anxiety disorder.⁵

The reason for these disparities is most likely related to the societal stigma and resulting prejudice and discrimination that GLBT face on a regular basis, from society at large, but also from family members, peers, co-workers and classmates.

In terms of more serious mental illnesses, such as those that are long-term and require hospitalization or in-patient care, unfortunately we don't know very much. However, of the approximately 18 million people with serious mental illness, a reasonable estimate suggests that about 720,000 are gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender.⁶

In one of the few studies of serious or major mental illness among GLBT people, researchers found that LGB men were less likely to report psychotic disorders, such as schizophrenia, but more likely to report mood disorders, such as depression and bi-polar disorders. They found no differences between GLBT and heterosexual women.⁷

A note on terminology

The term "GLBT" is commonly used as shorthand for the *gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender* community. It is important to note that while these groups may share some similarities, they are by no means identical in terms of their mental health issues, concerns, or needs.

While the terms *lesbian, gay, and bisexual* (and *heterosexual*) refer to someone's *sexual orientation*, **transgender** is a term related to *gender identity*, or someone's sense of being a man or woman, boy or girl. Transgender people are heterosexual, gay, lesbian, and bisexual.

The term **gay** typically refers to a man who is romantically and emotionally attracted to other men.

Lesbian (or gay woman) refers to a woman who is romantically and emotionally attracted to other women.

Bisexual refers to someone who is romantically and emotionally attracted to men and women. Being bisexual does not necessarily mean someone is involved in multiple relationships at once.

Some men and women may engage in same-sex behavior yet still identify as heterosexual, and some lesbian or gay people may have sexual relationships with people of the other sex. It is important not to make assumptions or judge people when it comes to sexual orientation and gender identity.

Finally, GLBT people are just as diverse as everyone else! We are old, young, rich, poor, parents, children, friends, co-workers, Latino, African American, and on and on. Just like people with mental illness, GLBT people are everywhere and in every community!

Special Considerations

Dual or Double Stigma

Mental illness is regrettably still stigmatized in our society. So, too, is being lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgendered. A GLBT person with mental illness may be in the unfortunate position, then, of having to contend with *both* stigmas. It is often the case that GLBT people experience a mental health care system that is not comfortable with or sensitive to issues related to sexual orientation, while the GLBT community is not sensitive to or educated about serious mental health issues.⁸ This societal stigma can contribute to and exacerbate existing mental health problems.

Family Support

People with mental illness often rely on family for support. However, for some GLBT people, families are not accepting of their sexual orientation or gender identity. In extreme cases, GLBT people are disowned or kicked out of their homes, which leaves them without an important source of support. Such situations may contribute to more vulnerability among this population, and they suggest just how important it is for GLBT people to have access to affirming, supportive, and culturally appropriate mental health services.⁸

Violence

The societal stigma and prejudice against GLBT people take many forms. Too often, they can take the form of verbal or physical violence. Experiences of violence can have significant and enduring consequences for mental health. A recent study found that 25% of GB men and 20% of LB women had experienced victimization as an adult based on their sexual orientation.⁹ In turn, these groups also reported more symptoms of depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress. Mental health providers need to be aware of this issue and the potential negative effects it can have on GLBT peoples' mental health.

Internalized Homophobia

Homophobia refers to irrational fear or hatred of gay people. Sometimes, GLBT people turn society's negative view about them inward, or *internalize* it. This can affect psychological well-being and can have consequences for healthy development, particularly among youth.¹⁰ Again, mental health providers need to be aware of this issue and how it may affect mental health and well-being among their GLBT clients and patients.

In sum, GLBT people **do not** by definition have a mental illness, but they have to contend with societal stigma and negative experiences that likely contribute to an increased vulnerability to mental illness. It is important to note, however, that despite this, most GLBT people ultimately live happy and health lives!

Resources

GLBT National Hotline
1-888-THE-GLNH (843-4564)

Rainbow Youth Hotline
1-877-LGBT-YTH (1-877-542-8984)

LGBT Suicide Prevention Hotline
www.TheTrevorProject.org or 1-800-850-8078

NAMI
www.nami.org
1-800-950-NAMI (6264)

Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays
www.pflag.org

American Psychological Association
www.apa.org/pi/lgbtc/

Rainbow Heights Club
www.rainbowheights.org
Support and advocacy for LGBT mental health consumers (based in New

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