

Potential Approaches to Mental Health Work with Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Communities (QLD)



Queensland Association
for Healthy Communities

Research indicates that LGBT people:

- have higher rates of anxiety, depression, self-harm and suicide than their heterosexual or non-transgender peers
- delay accessing health services for fear of an inappropriate response
- suffer poorer mental health, not because of their sexual or gender identity perse, but because of the reaction of those around them (and society in general) and social isolation.

This situation is particularly worse and more complex for transgender people and younger LGBT people.

Promotion

Mental health and ill-health are issues rarely discussed in gay media, LGBT organisations and the community more widely. While many LGBT people suffer stigma, discrimination, violence and lack of acceptance from family, friends and wider society, there is little support available. Those LGBT people with a mental illness suffer double marginalisation, from other mental health service users/providers and from other LGBT people.

LGBT people may not even be aware they have a mental health issue, as there is a community expectation that you have to be strong and work things out for yourself. Some LGBT people will deal with their mental health issues through drug & alcohol use/abuse and risky behaviour, including unsafe sex.



Key actions could involve:

- campaigns in gay media
- outreach to gay venues and events
- liaison with gay community social groups
- community forums
- internet presence at sites used by LGBT people

Prevention & Early Intervention

Anecdotally there is a lack of understanding on what constitutes mental illness and good mental health. LGBT people need to be supported to develop knowledge and skills to help them cope with the pressures of being LGBT, on top of pressures experienced by the general population. Knowledge of mental health support services is also low. Prevention and early intervention is a key goal.



Key actions could include:

- ensuring existing information (printed and electronic) is available and distributed to LGBT people, using community networks
- producing culturally specific information, focusing on mental health and well-being in an LGBT context
- peer education, through outreach, workshops and use of 'diffusion of innovation'

Suicide Prevention

The Queensland Government Suicide Prevention Strategy 2003-2008 identifies gay, lesbian and bisexual people as a priority population group. LGB people, especially young people, are at increased risk of suicidal behaviour and suicidal thinking, with gay men 3.7 times more likely to attempt suicide than their heterosexual peers. However there are no specific and targeted services on the ground for this population group.

✓ Key actions could include:

- development of an action plan to address suicide among lesbian, gay and bisexual people, along the life course
- training and development for youth service providers on working with LGBT young people
- address the stigma, discrimination, bullying and violence perpetrated by some in society that contributes to poor mental health
- further research into suicide, suicidal thoughts and self-harm among transgender people

Services to Address Mental Health

There are no specific LGBT mental health services in Qld. The main support for promoting/maintaining mental health is through counsellors (mainly private) and largely unfunded LGBT social/support groups (although the Gay & Lesbian Welfare Association does provide an evening telephone counselling service delivered by trained volunteers). A recent survey of counsellors in mainstream organisations had a very poor response, perhaps indicating a lack of interest in this area.

Other countries (particularly through Mind in the UK) have had success with providing support to LGBT mental health services users, in addition to their accessing mainstream services, through workshops, support groups and one-to-one support. The particular needs of transgender people, especially in accessing trained psychiatrists/psychologists, also needs to be addressed.

✓ Key actions could include:

- producing printed/electronic information on maintaining good mental health and understanding mental illness
- promoting existing mainstream services to LGBT people
- providing an LGBT specific information, assessment, referral and/or case co-ordination service (a friendly and trusted first port-of-call)
- expanding or developing LGBT specific services (especially peer support groups for mental health service users, psych services for transgender people)

Support to Families and Partners

Families and partners can contribute to both providing support to an LGBT person with a mental health concern, or cause/exacerbate the problem. Self esteem and attitudes towards one's own sexuality and gender identity are more positive among those with a supportive family. Partners/families need to receive support in how they can support someone with a mental health issue, and how they can get support themselves.

✓ Key actions could include:

- printed/electronic information for partners/family members of users
- development & support group for partners/families members of LGBT people (e.g. PFLAG)
- recognition of the role of same sex partners, by mental health services

Research

While there is a small, but growing body of mainly community initiated research into mental health within the LGBT community, there is still a lack of mainstream research into this area. What research there is tends to be quantitative and measures episodes of illness, self-harm or suicidal ideation. There is a gap in qualitative research which looks at what contributes to mental health and evaluates different support interventions.



Key actions could include:

- including questions on sexual orientation and gender identity in all mainstream mental health research projects
- reviewing monitoring information collected from mental health services, with a view to collecting client data on sexuality and gender identity
- commissioning specific research (with an emphasis on qualitative research) into mental health among LGBT communities
- ensuring generic and LGBT specific interventions are evaluated for their acceptability and effectiveness with LGBT people

Training & Development

LGBT people should expect to be able to receive a culturally appropriate and competent service from mainstream mental health service providers. However feedback from LGBT people is that this doesn't always happen, and service providers say they need assistance in developing their competence in this area. Reports from LGBT users of mental health services indicate that their sexuality/gender identity is sometimes inappropriately seen as the cause of their mental health problem.



Key actions could include:

- LGBT awareness in-service training for mental health services
- producing information resources on LGBT identities and mental health
- training for psychiatrists/psychologists around supporting transgender people, including understanding the social construction of gender
- development of self-audits, policy and other supports for services around LGBT clients
- requiring mental health services to report on how they are ensuring their service is culturally appropriate to LGBT people, and how they make this known
- LGBT organisations, most of which are run by volunteers, need training in working on mental health issues and how they can support their members/clients

Advocacy & Public Policy

LGBT people are largely absent from health policy and programs, including in the mental health field. This makes it difficult for front-line workers to meet the specific needs of LGBT people and hinders LGBT community groups engaging fully and successfully with the mental health sector.

Key actions could include:

- listing LGBT people as a special needs population in mental health policy and programs
- supporting LGBT organisations or individuals to take part in consultations, steering groups, advisory committees, interagencies, peak bodies etc.
- providing an option for LGBT people to approach an LGBT organisation to assist them in accessing a mainstream service and/or providing feedback and making a complaint

Current Capacity

At present in Queensland, there are no LGBT specific mental health workers or resources. LGBT community organisations are not currently funded to do work in the mental health field (or any field outside of HIV and youth). This severely limits the ability to advocate for, drive and/or implement the actions outlined above.

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