

allergies and pollutants are all stresses we can adapt to. At some point the challenges become more than you can absorb, and it is then that stressors become damaging to your health.

If you are persistently stressed, you may exceed your adaptive capacity and go beyond your reserves. This makes you susceptible to illness, makes illnesses you already have worse and can really reduce the joy you get out of living.

### SPECIAL MEASURES FOR SURVIVORS OF CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE

Many lesbians know that surviving childhood abuse can reduce the ability to cope with stresses and create barriers to health and thriving.

Surviving violence may require 'special measures' to get onto the road to health and healing.

Lesbians often find support groups and discussion with other women who have had similar experiences to be helpful. Rape Crisis Centres or Sexual Assault Referral Clinics offer counseling and assistance. Most states have services for the survivors of sexual assault. Many Women's Health Centres have support groups for survivors. There are also useful books available to help you get through the difficult job of healing from sexual abuse. Directing anger into political action can be very satisfying and empowering. It is very important to find a service, support group or help that you feel comfortable with.

### SPECIAL MEASURES FOR SURVIVING VIOLENCE AND HATE CRIMES

Being attacked and victimised can be devastating and has left many lesbians with feelings of mistrust, fear, anxiety and paranoia.

Sometimes the people lesbians expect to get help from, turn out to be hateful and violent as well!

The most reliable support is most likely to come from other lesbians, community networks and other groups with "tribal" loyalties to you. If you are living in fear, make yourself known to any local lesbian group or network that you can locate.

### GETTING ADVICE

There are many people and organisations which offer advice on reducing stress and dealing with the issues which cause stress. The question is, who's advice do you want?

Whoever you get advice from, you have the right to be treated with respect.

If you don't like the way you are being treated, leave and get advice somewhere else.

Women's health centres and lesbian lines often keep lists of "sympathetic" women practitioners, counselors and natural therapists.

When looking for a health practitioner to suit you, it may be helpful to ask other lesbians about their attitudes and how respectful they are of lesbians and of your lifestyle choices.

### DEALING WITH HOSTILITY AND DISCRIMINATION

If you are discriminated against or treated badly by someone you consulted for help with stress, complain. Consider complaining to your state health complaints unit, or to the professional association or registration board of the practitioner you were dealing with.

It will be important to get assistance from other lesbians. Many of us want to help in stamping out anti-lesbian behavior amongst "helping" professionals.



To locate lesbian groups and organisations, try your local telephone directory. Look under "L" for Lesbian, "G" for Gay and Lesbian and "W" for Women's information and health services.

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# STRESS



## LESBIAN HEALTH ISSUES ARE ACCESS ISSUES



Health is much more than the absence of disease, it is a state of complete physical, mental and social well being.

Lesbians face the same health problems as any other women, but many lesbian health issues are also social issues involving a lack of access to health care which is lesbian focussed, or at least respectful and accepting of lesbian lifestyles.

## BARRIERS TO ACCESS



Why is it that lesbians are less inclined to seek health care than heterosexual women?

Barriers that stop us from getting health care include:

-  Lack of acceptance of lesbian lifestyle or hatred towards lesbians
-  Being mistaken for a heterosexual by health care providers
-  A false belief that lesbians are immune from diseases such as HIV, other sexually transmitted diseases or cervical cancer
-  A lack of recognition of lovers and "families" in the health system
-  Poverty and inability to purchase health care.

## LESBIANS VALUE INDEPENDENCE AND SELF RELIANCE








These are important factors in maintaining health. Lesbians want to be welcomed and accepted by their health care providers. Access to low cost, holistic, natural care along with prevention and education is needed. Lesbians often seek out lesbian specific health information and access to women run clinics.

Regardless of the many barriers, lesbians are often in the forefront of social change, leading busy and healthy lives. Lesbians can and do thrive.

## SIGNS THAT YOU ARE THRIVING









-  An alert and creative mind
-  A keen memory
-  A spectrum of emotions and feelings
-  A strong and able body
-  Body cycles which are easy and painless; appetite, going to the toilet, menstruation and sleep

## WHY LESBIANS DO NOT RECOGNISE STRESS



Before you can rescue yourself from the destructive effects of stress, you need to be able to identify it. You may be tempted to ignore or discount the warning signs because:

-  You 'thrive' on stress and the buzz of adrenaline is an exhilarating part of the way you get through the day.
-  You feel trapped and unable to control the things which are causing you stress.
-  Low self esteem prevents you from demanding and insisting upon a better quality of life.
-  You have 'always' been stressed and distressed and it appears to be normal.
-  You enjoy living on the edge.
-  You prefer to be independent and strong and see seeking help as a sign of weakness.

## GETTING INSIGHT - NOTICING YOUR STRESSES



Few lesbians can rely upon others to rescue them from the many catastrophes and stresses of a lesbian lifestyle. This means that we have to learn to rely on ourselves to recognise our own 'warning signs'.

What are the tell tale signs which show that you are becoming stressed?

Do you get sleepless, short tempered, have mood swings, or drink more than usual? Do you sweat, stammer, become miserable and depressed , get butterflies in your stomach or sweaty palms? Do you cut yourself off from your friends, have memory lapses or notice appetite changes? Do you feel tired all the time, out of sorts or just simply overwhelmed?

Stress warning signs are as varied as we are as lesbians. Learn to recognise your own warning signs, especially the first warning you get that things are becoming "too much". This is the message from you to yourself that it is time to take preventative health action!

## TAKING ACTION TO RESCUE YOURSELF REQUIRES PRIDE



Lesbians have the right to do better than just survive. We have the right to thrive. We have the right to a life without fear. If you place a value on your own well being, it becomes easier to insist on a better quality of life.

If you realise that your life is being diminished by stress, take action. Simple measures will usually produce a big improvement in the way you feel. If you try them and they don't work, you may have to declare an emergency, make major changes, or take extraordinary measures in order to rescue yourself.

## ACTION TO OFFSET STRESS



When stress factors are out of control, try to increase positive input to counterbalance the stresses. Lesbians have tried and recommended the following general measures:

### RELAXATION / MEDITATION

You will need to set aside some uninterrupted time and space every day for this (say 10 minutes). You need to find something that you really enjoy; reading, meditation, sitting in the garden, creative visualisation, listening to a relaxation tape - until your mind is clear.

### TALKING IT OVER WITH FRIENDS OR WITH OTHER LESBIANS

You may need to search until you find a social setting in which you feel comfortable to talk about the things which are getting you down. There are many social and political groups for lesbians, seek out one where you feel that you fit in.

### EATING A HEALTHY DIET

Drink plenty of water, eat a range of fresh foods and buy fewer processed foods when you do your regular shopping.

### GETTING EXERCISE

Spend at least 15 minutes three times a week doing something vigorous - jogging, swimming, cycling, walking. Any activity which you enjoy and which increases your heart rate will work.

### MASSAGE

If you have never had one, try it! Massage feels good. If you like it, plan to have one regularly - every week or fortnight.

### DO MORE OF THE THINGS YOU ENJOY

Sex, passion, writing, painting, singing, gardening, walking, cycling, taking a bath, going to the beach, any kind of treat. You know what you like, the point is to decide that you deserve to have treats.

### CHANGE YOUR CIRCUMSTANCES

Sometimes radical action is required. If your life circumstances (home, relationship, job) are putting you in a persistently stressed state, you will have to weigh up the risks and benefits of radical change. Moving, ending a relationship or leaving a job can be stressful, but may also be the avenue to a better life. The main goal to keep in mind is that you have a right to thrive.

## STRESS FACTORS



We all adapt ourselves to the changing influences of our lives.

Many things can place demands on your ability to adapt. Some of them are well known. Illness, bereavement, relationship problems, lesbophobia, losing a job, or having one that you detest, poverty, low fitness, excess use of drugs and/or alcohol, side-effects of medication, exposure to