

Lesbian gay and bisexual (LGB) issues and mental health

Major changes in equality in the past twenty years have meant that society is changing for the better. However, many lesbian, gay and bisexual (LGB) people have and still experience difficulties which can impact on health and well-being. This factsheet looks at some of these issues and how to get support.



KEY POINTS

- LGB stands for lesbian, gay and bisexual.
- LGB people can still face issues which impact on their mental health and wellbeing.
- Research shows that mental health problems like depression and anxiety can be more common in LGB people.
- There may be specialist LGB mental health services available in your area that you can access for support.
- The Equality Act 2010 means no service provider may discriminate against anyone because they are lesbian, gay or bisexual.

This factsheet covers –

- [1. What do we mean by LGB?](#)
- [2. What issues might LGB people face?](#)
- [3. Where can I get help?](#)
- [4. Problems accessing services](#)

1. What do we mean by LGB?

‘LGB’ is a widely accepted term that stands for lesbian, gay and bisexual. It is often used to describe people who do not identify as being heterosexual or ‘straight’. You may see variations of the term being used, including LGBT (which incorporates transgender). You may not describe

yourself as being lesbian, gay or bisexual at all. We recognise that everyone will be different and we use LGB to describe people who may fit under this very general term.

[Top](#)

2. What issues might LGB people face?

Early medical perspectives viewed being LGB as a mental illness in itself. Homosexuality was seen as 'part of the problem' and needing to be treated through psychiatric care.¹ It wasn't until 1993 that the World Health Organisation removed homosexuality from its official list of mental illnesses.

The National Institute for Mental Health in England (NIMHE) carried out a review that showed that LGB people are at greater risk of suicidal behaviour and self harm. The risk of suicide is four times more likely in gay and bisexual men, whilst the risk of depression and anxiety were one and half times higher in LGB people.² Stonewall's 'Prescription for Change' report found higher rates of suicidal thoughts and self-harm in lesbian and bisexual women compared to women in general.³ In addition, LGB people can face discrimination and poor experiences of care which can also impact on mental health.

Below are some of the issues LGB people face that can have an impact on health and wellbeing:

Younger people

More than half (55 per cent) of younger LGB people experience homophobic bullying in Britain's schools. The majority of pupils who experience homophobic bullying have symptoms consistent with depression. Around a third (35%) of gay young people who aren't bullied are also likely to be depressed compared to just five per cent of young people generally.⁴

Coming out

Coming out for most people is an exciting and liberating experience. But telling someone that you are lesbian, gay or bisexual can also be a stressful and worrying time. If you come out and experience rejection, you may feel reluctant to open up again in the future. Sometimes you may feel that you have to hide your real self which can affect your mental wellbeing and cause stress.

LGB people can internalise the homophobia they encounter in their day to day lives and develop negative feelings towards their own sexuality. This can make it difficult for them to accept their own sexual orientation, sometimes being termed 'internal homophobia'.

Recent evidence suggested that coming out to at least one supportive person, such as a friend or a work colleague, can decrease feelings of

depression and increase overall sense of wellbeing and self esteem. This was compared to someone not coming out at all.⁵

Older people

Many older LGB people have experienced ill-treatment because of their sexual orientation in the past. This could have been at work, from authority figures or their own family. Half feel that their sexual orientation has, or will have, a negative effect on getting older.⁶ Concerns can be around future care needs, independence, mobility, health and housing.

Culture and identity

There can be a higher rate of alcohol and drug dependency in LGB people, with a higher risk in lesbian and bisexual women.⁷ Heavy drinking or drug use can make existing mental health problems worse and potentially trigger new ones.

Among gay men, an estimated 14-20% have anorexia or bulimia.⁸

You may feel pressure to conform to high expectations and set yourself ideals of what is expected from people who identify as gay. This can lead to you feeling alienated from your own community.

HIV and medication

LGB people living with HIV can find that their medication affects their emotional wellbeing. However there are now many different anti-HIV drugs available, and it is likely that you could try another one that is less problematic.

HIV specialists are very experienced in working with people who have depression and anxiety. If you have had any mental health problems in the past, it is helpful to tell your HIV consultant when you start discussing treatment options. Anti-HIV medications can interact with certain medications used to treat mental illness although there are some which cause less interactions.⁹ We recommend that you discuss any medication issues with your HIV consultant and psychiatrist. You should let them know if you are taking any medication for your mental health.

[Top](#)

3. Where can I get help?

Having a mental health problem is not exclusive to being LGB. However if you or someone you know might be struggling then it is important to seek help.

Here are some suggestions on where to get support:

- Some LGB health services run workshops and events dedicated to helping with confidence and self esteem. There may also be LGB

social groups, sports clubs or activities in your area that you could become involved in.

- Some LGB specific services exist across England for alcohol and drug misuse.
- Throughout England and Wales there are services especially for younger people that can help with advice, support and meeting other LGB people.
- Some older LGB people who receive help with their social care needs have found that opting for the direct payments system offers them more freedom to organise their own care. They can then use carers they feel comfortable with.
- Often medication for mental health problems (such as antidepressants) work better if used along with psychological therapy or 'talking therapies'. Examples include cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) and counselling. These can be accessed through primary care services (like your GP), or through some LGB organisations.
- 'Complementary' therapies are a range of alternative treatments that can be used alongside more conventional medical treatments. They are not for everyone, but can help some people with a sense of improved wellbeing and a feeling of calm. Some examples include yoga, mindfulness and meditation.
- Remember that if you feel isolated or confused about your sexuality, it is often worth talking to someone who has been through the same thing. There are different organisations across the country who can offer emotional support through listening lines or instant messaging. Most will have people who identify as LGB as volunteers and will have an understanding of your concerns.

Many of the services in the useful contacts section of this factsheet will be able to locate local services, or will have a database available through their website or information line.

We produce factsheets on the following subjects that you might find useful:

- Complementary therapies
- Talking therapies
- Direct payments

You can download them for free from www.rethink.org/factsheets or call 0300 5000 927 and ask for a copy to be sent to you.

[Top](#)

4. Problems accessing services

Some people identifying as LGB are still reluctant to approach mainstream health services or are unwilling to disclose their orientation in case they are misunderstood, or their needs will not be met. This may be based on past experience or discrimination, and some people prefer specialist LGB services. Many feel that there are barriers preventing them from being able to access services. The most common negative experiences relate to a range of awkward, clumsy or inappropriate responses to identifying as LGB.¹⁰ Services or professionals who respond in this way are likely to have a lack of awareness of LGB issues rather than intending to respond badly.

If you feel unhappy with how your NHS care is being handled, then you could contact the Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS), who can try to resolve any problems or questions you have. You can find your local office details through the website listed in the 'useful contacts' section of this factsheet. If you wish to put in a complaint then your PALS will also be able to advise you on this. You can find more information on making a formal complaint in our '**Complaining about the NHS or Social Services**' factsheet, which you can download for free from www.rethink.org/factsheets or call 0300 5000 927 and ask for a copy to be sent to you.

If you are unhappy with your support then the help of an advocate can be useful. An advocate can help you to be fully involved in decisions about your care. An advocate is independent from mental health services and can help to make your voice heard with problems you may come across. They may be able to help with writing letters for you or attending appointments or meetings.

Some areas have specialist LGB advocacy services. You can search for a local organisation at the Action for Advocacy website www.actionforadvocacy.org.uk or call them on 020 7921 4395.

Stonewall have also produced a guide entitled 'Protecting Patient Rights' with the General Medical Council.

What does the law say?

Under the Equality Act 2010, it is unlawful for a service provider to directly or indirectly discriminate against someone who identifies or is perceived as being LGB. The NHS is a service provider.

[Top](#)



LLGS (London Lesbian and Gay Switchboard) provide national information and a listening service over phone and email/ instant messaging. All volunteers identify as LGBT so the person answering the telephone will have an understanding of your situation. The helpline operates from 10am to 11pm, seven days a week, 52 weeks a year. They are based in London but do take calls from the whole of the UK.

London Lesbian & Gay Switchboard
PO Box 7324
London N1 9QS

Helpline: 020 7837 7324

Website: www.llgs.org.uk

Stonewall – Whats in my Area?

This database can help you find your local lesbian, gay and bisexual community groups or services.

Website: www.stonewall.org.uk/at_home/whats_in_my_area

GMFA are a gay men's health charity and have a number of booklets and workbooks that can be downloaded for free online. They are written by counsellors and cover a range of topics exploring self esteem and relationships. They also have extensive information on HIV medication and offer a UK social, leisure and sports activities handbook called 'The Guide'.

Website: www.gmfa.org.uk

PACE offer specialised LGBT advocacy, counseling services and family support, and also hold workshops and produce publications. Based in London.

Telephone: 020 7700 1323

Website: www.pacehealth.org.uk

The Lesbian and Gay Foundation are a charity offering mental health services and resources to the gay community in the north of England.

The Lesbian & Gay Foundation,
Number 5,
Richmond Street, Manchester
M1 3HF

Telephone: 0845 3 30 30 30

Website: www.lgf.org.uk

Age UK offers guidance and support for older LGB people who may be experiencing difficulties in accessing services or care.

Website: <http://www.ageuk.org.uk/health-wellbeing/relationships-and-family/older-lesbian-gay-and-bisexual/>

London Friend is a long-running LGBT charity which offers a telephone support service, as well as many different drop-in counselling and support groups. They also run a specific befriending service and a carers support group. They are based in North London.

Helpline: **020 7837 3337** open Mondays, Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Fridays 7.30pm-9.30pm

Website: www.londonfriend.org.uk

Being Gay is Okay provides online information and advice for under 25 year olds.

Website: www.bgiok.org.uk

Antidote offer information and support exclusively to LGBT people around drugs, alcohol and addiction.

Telephone: **0207 833 1674** **Website:** www.antidote-lgbt.com

FFLAG (Family and Friends of Lesbians and Gays) offer support for parents, families and friends of LGB people.

Telephone: **0845 652 0311** **Website:** www.fflag.co.uk

ELOP are a London based LGBT mental health and wellbeing centre offering a holistic approach, with free counselling and young people's services.

Telephone: **020 8509 3898** **Website:** www.elop.org

Pink Therapy has a directory listing therapists throughout the UK who work with the LGB community

Website: www.pinktherapy.com/en-us/findatherapist.aspx

Patient Advice and Liaison Service

Website: www.pals.nhs.uk/

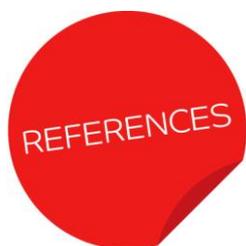
Equality Advisory and Support Service

Website: www.equalityadvisoryservice.com

Telephone: 0800 444 205, Textphone: 0800 444 206

Email: advice@equalityadvisoryservice.com

[Top](#)



¹ McFarlane L. *Diagnosis: Homophobic. The Experiences of Lesbians, gay men and bisexuals in mental health services*. PACE. 1998.

² National Institute of Mental Health England *Mental disorders, suicide, and deliberate self harm in lesbian, gay and bisexual people: a systematic review*. 2007

³ Stonewall. *Prescription for Change*. 2008

http://www.stonewall.org.uk/documents/prescription_for_change.pdf
(accessed 10th November 2012).

⁴ Guasp, A. *The School Report* Stonewall. 2012,

⁵ Legate, N., Ryan, R., Weinstein, N. Is Coming Out Always a “Good Thing”? Exploring the Relations of Autonomy Support, Outness, and Wellness for Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual Individuals. *Social Psychological and Personality Science*. 2011

<http://spp.sagepub.com/content/early/2011/06/10/1948550611411929.abstract?rss=1> (accessed 5th December 2012)

⁶ Stonewall. *LGB in Later Life*.

http://www.stonewall.org.uk/documents/lgb_in_later_life_final.pdf
(accessed 10th November 2012)

⁷ See reference 1

⁸ Russell, C., Keel, P. Homosexuality as a specific risk factor for eating disorders in men. *International Journal of Eating Disorders*. 2002; 31: 300-306

⁹ Carter M. *HIV, Mental Health and Emotional Wellbeing* (Third Edition) NAM. 2010

¹⁰ Franks T, Peel E, Scott, P. *Where to Turn: A Review of current provision in online and offline mental health support for LGBT People Experiencing Suicidal Distress*. PACE. 2010

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Monday to Friday, 10am to 1pm

Email advice@rethink.org

The Rethink Advice & Information Service welcomes your feedback on whether this information was helpful to you. You can provide feedback in the following ways:

By email: feedback@rethink.org

By post:

Rethink Advice & Information Service
Rethink Mental Illness
89 Albert Embankment
London SE1 7TP

By telephone: 0300 5000 927



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