



The Challenges LGBTQ Youth Face and the Effects on their Mental Health

Maureen Bailey has silently dealt with transgender issues since she was 11 years old. She has also struggled with depression and suicidal ideation -- fortunately without ever acting on these thoughts -- since losing her brother, daughter-in-law and son to cancer, homicide and suicide, respectively, in April 2009. Maureen developed this fact sheet for parents and teachers to build an understanding of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and questioning (LGBTQ) youth, the challenges they face and the effects these challenges have on them, especially their mental health.

I believe in order to understand this subject, we will need to agree on the following points:

- Without good mental health, we cannot be completely healthy.
- Good mental health is as important as our physical and dental health.
- Mental health conditions are medical conditions that affect how we think, feel and behave.
- We all have emotional ups and downs in life caused by events we experience. Mental health conditions go beyond these ups and downs.
- Research has shown that the LGBTQ community experiences the same mental health challenges as the rest of the population. However, the LGBTQ community experiences more negative outcomes, due to multiple prejudices.

Conditions that Affect the LGBTQ Teen and Young Adult Community

Members of the LGBTQ community are three times more likely than others to experience a mental health condition, such as depression or anxiety, compared to non-LGBTQ individuals.

What fuels these feelings are the fear of coming out and discrimination due to sexual orientation and/or gender identity issues. These fears can lead to mental health disorders, thoughts of suicide and substance abuse. Because of this, the LGBTQ community faces the stigma and prejudices of their sexual and gender identities while also dealing with societal biases against mental health conditions.

These fears stem from the possibility of ridicule and/or rejection from the mental health system and the general population at large. The effect of these dual prejudices and stigma can be particularly harmful when someone is seeking treatment.

Bullying can have the same effect as stigma and prejudices on ALL students who have experienced this victimization.

The rates of mental health conditions are extremely high for those individuals who choose not to reveal their gender or sexual orientations.

Mental Health Disorders, Substance Abuse and Suicide

The LGBTQ young face fear, hatred and prejudice at school, with peers, in the community and at home, which can lead to a much higher risk of self-harm and thoughts of suicide. These youth are six times more likely to experience symptoms of depression and anxiety than the general population. Early intervention, comprehensive treatment and family support are key to recovery from these mental health conditions.

The LGBTQ community also experiences a much higher rate of drug and alcohol abuse. An estimated 20 to 30% of LGBTQ people abuse substances, compared to 9% of the general population; and 25% of LGBTQ people abuse alcohol, compared to 5 to 10% of the general population.

In addition, the LGBTQ community is at a higher risk for suicide because they lack peer support and they commonly contend with harassment, mental health conditions and substance abuse. Among LGBTQ youth, ages 10 to 24 years old, suicide is one of the leading causes of death. Youth in this age group are four times more likely to experience suicidal thoughts, engage in self-harm or attempt suicide than straight people.

Family support plays a very key role in affecting the likelihood of suicide attempts. Those who have been rejected by their families are more than eight times more likely to attempt suicide than those who are accepted by their families.

Advice for Finding and Working with a Mental Health Provider

Finding a mental health provider who you and your child can trust is very important. Do not forget to ask them about their understanding, knowledge and prior experience with the LGBTQ community. (A list of resources is at the end of this fact sheet.)

Remember to be honest about everything you are feeling and experiencing when talking with your provider and encourage your child to do the same.

So, How Does All of This Affect our Youth?

Being a “normal” teenager in today’s world can be quite challenging. For LGBTQ teens, life can be a lot more difficult than for non-LGBTQ teens.

Effect on Mental Health

- LGBTQ youth are more likely to abuse alcohol and other drugs.
- Only 37% of LGBTQ youth report being happy, compared to 67% of non-LGBTQ youth.
- Eighty percent of LGBTQ youth believe they will eventually be happy, but almost 50% believe they would have to leave their hometowns in order to be happy.
- With each incident of physical or verbal harassment, the risk of self-harm increases 2 ½ times.

Effects on Education

- Gay teens in U.S. schools are subjected to such intense bullying that they are unable to receive an adequate education, resulting in lower grade point averages. This problem has the second greatest adverse impact on their lives, following non-accepting families.
- One survey reported that one-third of LGBTQ respondents missed an entire day of school in the past month because they do not feel safe there.

“The hard thing was changing my thinking – the ‘shoulda, coulda, woulda’ thinking – and changing ‘but’ to ‘and.’ It sounds insignificant; it is not. You realize the power because you realize you believe; you’re not casting a doubt.”

– Maureen Bailey

- Sadly, LGBTQ youth feel they have nowhere to turn. Sixty percent of these students did not report incidents to school staff. The one-third who did report an incident stated school staff did nothing in response to the report.

Resources and Support

- The Trevor Project: A multimedia support network for LGBTQ youth providing crisis intervention and suicide prevention. (www.thetrevorproject.org)
- The Rainbow Access Initiative: Works to inform and educate healthcare providers on LGBTQ specific issues. (www.rainbowaccess.org)
- The Pride Institute: An unlocked LGBTQ exclusive facility that offers a residential treatment program, including psychiatric care for depression, anxiety and other needs. (www.pride-institute.com)
- The GLBT National Help Center: Provides multiple resources and access to a hotline and youth chat line. (www.glbntnationalhelpcenter.org)
- The Association of Gay and Lesbian Psychiatrists: Provides numerous resources for LGBTQ people, including a directory of LGBTQ-friendly therapists. (www.aglp.org)
- Human Rights Campaign (www.hrc.org)
- Human Rights Watch (www.hrw.org)
- National Youth Advocacy Coalition (www.nyacyouth.org)
- Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (www.pflag.org)

* Percentages and statistics were obtained from various resources, including Human Rights Campaign, National Alliance on Mental Illness, Center for Disease Control and Prevention, Mental Health America

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Visit www.AttitudesInReverse.org • **Call** 609-945-3200 • **Write** info@AttitudesInReverse.org

PLEASE NOTE: AIR is not a counseling service. If you are in crisis, call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-Talk (1-800-273-8255).

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