

# Mental Health Among the LGBTQ Community

By Alison C. Smith, Ph.D.

Are people who identify themselves as gay, lesbian, or bisexual any different in terms of their mental health than their heterosexual counterparts? A great deal of attention has been paid over the

past decade or so to finding the answers to this very question. A 2002 review of research studies looked closely at this issue and revealed that there were no substantial differences between these two groups in terms of severe forms of mental illness (e.g., schizophrenia). The researchers did find, however, that people with same-sex partners had higher rates of depression, anxiety, substance abuse, and suicidal thoughts. It is perhaps not surprising then, that men and women in same-sex relationships were more likely to utilize mental health services.

"If you are a friend or family member of someone who is gay or lesbian, recognize the significant impact you can have on their lives by simply accepting them for who they are."

On the flip side, studies looking at how family acceptance affects health outcomes for LGBTQ youth found that family acceptance predicts greater self-esteem, social support, and general health. Such acceptance also was found to protect against depression, substance abuse, and suicidal ideation and behaviors. It is significant that the very issues that occur in higher rates among the gay



and lesbian community are the very ones that can be moderated by acceptance of loved ones.

Two other positive results were found, both of which relate to women in the lesbian community. First researchers in one study

found that lesbians tend to have higher self-esteem than their heterosexual peers. Furthermore, another study demonstrated that the degree to which lesbians were "out" in terms of their sexual orientation was related to the amount of psychological distress they reported experience. More specifically, the more "out" women were, the less psychological distress they experienced.

What does all this information mean in the day-to-day lives of people in the LGBTQ community? What does it mean to the friends and family of gays and lesbians? It means that if you are gay or lesbian and do not have support and acceptance from your family, find a supportive network that does accept you for who you are. Lean on your friends, attend a support group, utilize community resources, or find a therapist. If you are a friend or family member of someone who is gay or lesbian, recognize the significant impact you can have on their lives by simply accepting them for who they are.

The reality is that people in the LGBTQ community are resilient and strong, but it is important to acknowledge that they are also more vulnerable to having problems with issues like anxiety, depression, and substance abuse. It is clear, however, that this vulnerability can be mediated by acceptance by self and others. If you are a gay person struggling with issues such as anxiety or depression, or know someone who is, the answer is simple: find help and support, it can make a world of difference.



Alison C. Smith, Ph.D.  
Licensed Clinical Psychologist

2915 Hunter Mill Rd., Suite 14  
Oakton, VA 22124  
(703) 407-9181  
ACSmithPhD@aol.com  
www.NorthernVAPsychologist.com

**Individual and Couples Therapy**

**Psychological Assessment**—Learning Disabilities, ADHD, and Differential Diagnosis

**Consultation Services**—Specialize in reviewing assessment needs or results.

**Mental Health Evaluations**—Evaluations for pre-surgical or fertility purposes.

Insurance—I take Tricare and most BCBS plans.

**About the Author**

I am a licensed clinical psychologist who specializes in working with lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, and questioning (LGBTQ) individuals, particularly those coping with histories of childhood sexual abuse. I earned a master's degree in clinical psychology from the University of Colorado at Colorado Springs, and a doctorate in the same field from George Mason University. I have worked with a wide variety of people dealing with a wide variety of problems ranging

from coping with significant life events (e.g., divorce, job loss, trauma), to issues such as low self-esteem, identity confusion, and relationship problems, to symptoms such as anxiety, depression and more. To me, the most essential component of psychotherapy is developing a strong therapeutic relationship between the therapist and client. I build upon a foundation of interpersonal psychotherapy and incorporate aspects of other approaches such as psychodynamic, humanistic, and cognitive-behavioral psychotherapy.