

LGBT Mental Health, Jan Bridget

High Levels of Mental Health Problems

Lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) people are more likely to experience mental health problems than heterosexuals. BUT THIS NEED NOT BE THE CASE! The problems usually start in adolescence, when we are trying to come to terms with our sexuality.

We found that members of GALYIC (Gay and Lesbian Youth in Calderdale) were much more likely than heterosexual young people to experience depression, anxiety, self-harm, attempted suicide and phobias; other research has also found eating disorders to be a problem.

An organisation in New Zealand, PrideNZ, have developed a series of videos of LGBT people talking about their mental health. These six videos show how the stress of coming to terms with being LGBT can sometimes push young people over the top. Why not have a look at them and see if they ring any bells with you? Click [here](#) to access videos.

Beyondblue is a national charity in Australia. They are developing resources for LGBT people and are currently conducting research about on-line resources for LGBT people. You cannot take part in the survey unless you are in Australia but YOU CAN access the information available on the site by clicking [here](#). This very useful resource tells you about mental health in general, stress, anxiety, addiction, help for suicidal thoughts, and helping someone else who might be suicidal. Of course, all the help numbers are Australian - see the Useful links section at the bottom of the page to find out about support in the UK.

Who's More Vulnerable?

Not all LGBT people experience mental health problems. Those who are least vulnerable are likely to have experienced few problems accepting themselves and being accepted by their family and friends.

Those who are most vulnerable are less likely:-

- ✓ to be out to, accepted and supported by, their family;
- ✓ to have developed a positive identity as an LGBT person;
- ✓ to have a network of LGBT friends who have positive identities;
- ✓ not have experienced bullying, especially homophobic bullying, at school;
- ✓ to belong to a religion that says homosexuality is a sin;
- ✓ misuse alcohol or drugs;
- ✓ to be homeless.

Most LGBT young people experience homophobic bullying. If you have support either from your parents or school, this can make a huge difference. However, many LGBT young people are not accepted by their families; some are not out because they are terrified they will be rejected.

When this is happening to you and you are isolated and do not have anyone you can talk to or trust, you are probably at your most vulnerable.

What Can You Do?

1. Understand why you are vulnerable.

Mental health problems are usually caused through too much emotional stress. Life is stressful at times, and we have to learn to cope with it. But too much stress, especially at vulnerable times, can push us over the top.

As we are growing up we hear lots of nasty things said about gay people. We see it on the TV, on films, read it in newspapers; we sometimes hear our families saying bad things; we certainly hear negative things said at school: from putting anything down by saying, "that is so gay!" to words and phrases such as queer, pervert, sick and so on.

We learn, from an early age, that being gay (or lesbian, bisexual or transgender) is not 'normal'. It is no surprise, therefore, that we are in a dreadful state when we realise that us being different (which we might have known about for a long time) is about us being gay. This is called 'internalised homophobia.'

If you belong to a religion or a culture that says homosexuality is a sin, you are likely to feel even more guilty. Who wants to be a pervert, sick, a sinner, someone people hate?

In order to feel better about being gay we need to go through what is called the 'coming out' process. Coming out, accepting ourselves and then telling others that we are gay, can be a very stressful time. We constantly fear rejection.

The average age for coming out has dropped significantly over the past ten years. Young people are now starting to come out at around 14 years.

This means you are likely to be totally alone dealing with the process. It means you are likely to either be experiencing homophobic bullying or seeing other people in your school being bullied because people know or think they are gay. It means you are unlikely to have the support of your parents because they don't know you are gay as you are too terrified to tell them. Or even worse, you think or know that they will reject you if they find out. THIS IS STRESS BIG TIME!

The bullying is likely to push you over the top, but even if you yourself are not being bullied, any extra stress, such as exams or parents getting divorced, can push you over the top.

Is it surprising that many young LGBT people get depressed and anxious at this time? Is it surprising that they turn to alcohol and drugs as a way of dulling the pain? Is it surprising that, having experienced bullying on a day-to-day basis they develop agoraphobia, social phobia or school phobia? Is it surprising that some turn to self-harm as a way of letting out the pain? Is it surprising that some try to kill themselves?

2. Find support

The most important thing to do is to find support. You do not need to go through this process on your own. There will be someone you can talk to.

Speak to a teacher (GALYIC found that more teachers are responding positively), or a Connexions personal adviser or youth worker or maybe the school nurse.

Look out for posters that challenge homophobia or publicise the local LGBT youth group: this is usually a sign that there is someone supportive around.

You can also contact [MindFull](#), an on-line mentoring service for young people aged 11-17 years. They have LGBT mentors.

Or failing that, ring [ChildLine](#).

3. Come out

In order to reduce the likelihood of developing mental health problems (or reducing them), you need to come out. But coming out isn't without risks and it isn't always safe to come out, especially to parents, when you are very young. The more positive experiences you have coming out the better, but negative experiences can make you more vulnerable, so, again, get support!

It is important that you read the [Coming Out](#) section on the website if you haven't already done so.

4. Meet other young LGBT people.

It is just as important, if not more important, to be able to meet other young people who are the same age as you and who have been through similar experiences. You need to go through the 'normal' processes of adolescence, such as developing social skills, trusting friendships, romantic relationships.

Isolation is one of the most dangerous situations for any LGBT young person to be in.

Watch [Sixteen](#), a DVD members of Gay and Lesbian Youth in Calderdale made with the Department of Health.

5. Develop resilience

All of the above will help you develop resilience (being able to bounce back) and skills to deal with stress, conflict and homophobia in a positive way (instead of turning to alcohol or drugs or self harm). You are more likely to get stronger when you join your local gay youth group.

When I ran Gay and Lesbian Youth in Calderdale I took members away on a residential and we discussed the stress of belonging to a minority group, click [here](#) to download the report.

Here is a list of positive ways to deal with stress that members came up with: stress balls, counselling, alternative therapies, baking, relaxation, physical exercise, physical relief, spending time with mates/family, screaming, singing and dancing, listening to tuneage, swearing at pillows, hard day's work, getting enough sleep, cross-dressing, herbal tea/Horlicks.

6. Fight back

Once you are strong enough it can help to start fighting back. Get involved with local campaigns, consider setting up a [Gay Straight Alliance](#) in your school.

It is useful to make alliances with other oppressed groups: the system that oppresses LGBT people also oppresses black and minority ethnic people, disabled people, poor people, women. Take a look at [Lynne Cooper's story](#) about being a transracial adopted child.

There are many other video extracts from Adopted The Movie, which tell similar stories about the experiences of transracial adopted children, many of which are very similar to those of young LGBT people. Here is a link [Framework](#), to a power point presentation which you might find helpful.

Getting Stuck

Sometimes we can get stuck in the coming out process and remain vulnerable. Here are some examples:

Chat Rooms

A word of warning about on-line chat groups: many isolated LGBT young people find support by joining internet chat groups. You need to be aware that this could be dangerous. There is no way that you can be certain the person you are talking to is who they say they are. Another point to bear in mind is that some people on chat groups will not be out, nor have a positive identity; they would not, therefore, be a positive role model for you. If you do want to talk to other young LGBT people on line, we would suggest the [Queer Youth Network](#).

Isolated Relationships

If you are isolated and get in a relationship with someone else who is isolated, it is likely that your partner will not want you to meet other LGBT people for fear of losing you. This could be dangerous and make you vulnerable to remaining isolated, without support, and without going through the usual developmental processes other young people go through. It also opens up the possibility of [same-sex domestic](#) violence.

Alcohol and Drugs

One other word of warning, using alcohol and drugs as a way of coping won't help: in fact, it is more likely to stop you going through the coming out process and developing a positive identity.

The [Substance Misuse](#) section tells you more about this.

Counselling

It could be that you have already developed mental health problems. We have found that once young people access support, come out and develop a network of friends, their mental health problems usually reduce or go away completely.

This is less likely to happen for those who have additional problems created by substance misuse; homelessness, are living at home with homophobic families; are stuck with internalised homophobia (because of substance misuse or because of their family religion); are experiencing on-going homophobic bullying and abuse; have been sexually abused or raped; or are in abusive relationships. These young people are likely to need extra help through counselling.

Most gay youth groups, schools and GPs can help you access a counselling service. It is important, however, that you make sure the person you see is gay-friendly and understands about internalised homophobia and the coming out process.

Here is a link to a free telephone counselling service provided by the [Lesbian and Gay Foundation](#). Here is a link to a free telephone counselling service provided by [PACE](#)

Having Fun

Once you access your local LGBT youth group it is likely you will be able to attend all sorts of activities that other young people do, such as go-karting, residential weekends and other activities. The difference is that you will be attending these activities as you; you won't have to pretend to be something you are not.

One last thing, please be persistent when you contact your local LGBT youth group; many have few resources and cannot staff their telephone or mobile all of the time.

Author biog: Jan Bridget

Jan Bridget retired in 2012 after over 25 years of working with LGBT people, and for the latter 14 years working specifically with LGBT young people in Calderdale.

Jan's professional background is Youth and Community Work. Jan jointly set up and ran [Lesbian Information Service](#) in 1987 followed by [Gay and Lesbian Youth](#) in Calderdale in 1999. She was a member of the Department of Health's Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity Advisory Group; whilst involved with SOGIAG GALYIC made a [short training film](#) for the Department of Health.

More recently Jan worked with the National CAMHS Support Service until it ceased to exist in 2011; whilst involved with NCSS she developed a specific web page on LGBT youth (many of the resources have been incorporated into the [Child and Maternal Health Intelligence Network](#) as well as expanding the NCSS's Organisational Cultural Competence Self Assessment Tool (OCCA Tool) and Work Book for Children and Adolescent Mental Health Services.

Jan recently commented on the MindEd E-Learning Core Curriculum to be launched on March 25 2014. She is also on the [Youth Chances Advisory Panel](#) and has volunteered her expertise for the new LGBT Youth Suicide Prevention Project at Lancaster University, having worked with Liz McDermott (and Katrina Roen, now at the University of Oslo) on an earlier project connected with LGBT young people and self harm.