

## The Journey

The following information is taken from The National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI). It is important to understand who the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Questioning, Intersexed (LGBTQI\*) community are and the mental health issues they encounter. The LGBTQI community represents a diverse range of identities and expressions of gender and sexual orientation, as well diversity in terms of race, religion, ethnicity, nationality and socioeconomic class. This complexity is important to understand as a unique and valuable aspect of the LGBTQI community that can result in a strong sense of pride and resiliency.

While belonging to the LGBTQI community can be a source of strength, it also brings unique challenges. For those who identify as LGBTQI, it's important to recognize how your experience of sexual orientation and gender identity relates to your mental health. There is strong evidence from recent research that members of this community are at a higher risk for experiencing mental health conditions — especially depression and anxiety disorders. LGB adults are more than [twice as likely](#) as heterosexual adults to experience a mental health condition. Transgender individuals are [nearly four times as likely](#) to experience a mental health condition.

LGB youth also experience greater risk for mental health conditions and suicidality. LGB youth are more than [twice as likely](#) to report experiencing persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness as their heterosexual peers. Transgender youth face further disparities as they are [twice as likely](#) to experience depressive symptoms, seriously consider suicide, and attempt suicide compared to cisgender lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer and questioning youth.

### Important Risk Factors of LGBTQI Mental Health

#### **Coming Out**

[Positive changes](#) in societal acceptance of LGBTQI people act as a protective factor for mental health. However, this shift in acceptance has meant that many LGBTQI youth "come out" or share their sexual orientation or gender identity at younger developmental ages, which can impact their social experiences and relationships. This can have negative mental health impacts, particularly for youth who are not in supportive environments.

#### **Rejection**

For many in the LGBTQI community, coming out can be a difficult or even traumatic experience. It can be difficult to cope with rejection of something as personal as one's identity from family or close friends, within the workplace, or in a faith community.

According to a 2013 [survey](#), 40% of LGBT adults have experienced rejection from a family member or a close friend. A 2019 [school climate survey](#) showed that 86% of LGBTQ youth reported being harassed or assaulted at school, which can significantly impact their mental health.

#### **Trauma**

Homophobia, biphobia, transphobia, bullying and feeling identity-based shame is often traumatic for people. The LGBTQI community faces many forms of discrimination, including: labeling, stereotyping, denial of opportunities or access, and verbal, mental and physical abuse. They are one of the most targeted communities by [perpetrators of hate crimes](#) in the country.

Such discrimination can contribute to a [significantly heightened risk](#) for PTSD among individuals in the LGBTQI community compared to those who identify as heterosexual and cisgender.

#### **Substance Use**

Substance misuse or overuse, which may be used as a coping mechanism or method of self-medication, is a significant concern for members of this community. LGB adults are [nearly twice as likely](#) as heterosexual adults to experience a substance use disorder. Transgender individuals are [almost four times as likely](#) as cisgender individuals to experience a substance use disorder. Illicit drug use is [significantly higher](#) in high school-aged youth who identify as LGB or are unsure of their identity, compared to their heterosexual peers.

#### **Homelessness**

It is estimated that LGBTQI youth and young adults have a [120%](#) higher risk of experiencing homelessness — often the result of family rejection or discrimination based on gender identity or sexual orientation. This risk is especially high among Black LGBTQI youth. Many members of the LGBTQI community face the added challenge of finding homeless shelters that will accept them, and experience elevated rates of harassment and abuse in these spaces.

## **Suicide**

Many people in this community struggle in silence — and face worse health outcomes as a result.

- The LGBTQI population is at a [higher risk](#) than the heterosexual, cisgender population for suicidal thoughts and suicide attempts.
- High school students who identify as lesbian, gay or bisexual are more than [four times as likely](#) to have attempted suicide compared to their heterosexual peers.
- [40%](#) of transgender adults have attempted suicide in their lifetime, compared to less than 5% of the general U.S. population.

## **Inadequate Mental Health Care**

The approach to sexual orientation and gender identity in mental health care often groups together anyone in the LGBTQI community, when these communities are considered at all. This method can be problematic as each sub-community faces unique challenges, rates of mental illness and experiences.

The LGBTQI community encompasses a wide range of individuals with separate and overlapping challenges regarding their mental health. Other identity factors including race and economic status can affect the quality of care they receive or their ability to access care.

Additionally, members of this community may face harassment or a lack of cultural competency from potential providers. These experiences can lead to a fear of disclosing sexual orientation and/or gender identity due to potential discrimination or provider bias.

Confronting these barriers *and* mental health symptoms with an LGBTQI-inclusive mental health provider can lead to better outcomes, and ultimately recovery.

### How to Find The Right Mental Health Professional

There are important considerations when seeking LGBTQI-competent care. Here are a few steps to find a professional.

#### **Step 1: Think About What You're Looking For**

While considering the type of mental health professional you are looking for, it is important to consider the following:

- If you want a provider who shares specific parts of their identity with you, you may be able to find out if your provider is LGBTQI by reading their profiles or websites.
- It may be easier to find a provider that has a baseline competency in LGBTQI issues, rather than one who specializes in LGBTQI care. If your mental health conditions are not rooted in sexual orientation and/or gender identity, it may not be necessary for the provider to be specialized in LGBTQI issues.
- If you are transgender and are seeking a mental health professional to write a letter of support for gender affirming medical care or for legal documentation change, you should seek a provider who understands the insurance or legal requirements of support letters.

#### **Step 2: Gather Referrals**

Many websites that provide mental health professional directory searches, including insurance company websites, have filters that allow you to show only mental health providers who have a specialty or competency in working with LGBTQI patients. Many insurance companies also have information numbers, and they can help find you providers that are in your area, accept your insurance and list LGBTQI competency in their profile.

These directories, however, are not the only way to find LGBTQI competent providers. Many LGBTQI organizations and community groups provide directories that have been vetted by other LGBTQI people. You may want to check with:

- Local LGBTQI community centers
- Local LGBTQI health centers
- LGBTQI community groups such as equality groups, health collectives, social organizations, support groups
- Affirming places of worship

#### **Step 3: Make the Call**

Some people find it difficult to make an initial call to a mental health provider. Transgender people in particular may feel uncomfortable talking on the phone due to concerns about being misgendered due to their natural voice range. If you find you're reluctant to call, ask a friend or family member to call for you.

When making the initial call, you may want to ask the provider then if they have previous experience with LGBTQI patients or if they are comfortable working with LGBTQI patients. You can wait to ask this during the first appointment, but you may save time and energy by asking from the start.

#### **Step 4: Ask Questions:**

Providers expect and welcome questions from their patients or clients, since this helps them better understand what is important in their treatment. In your first visit with a mental health provider, be forthright about the fact that you are looking for an LGBTQI competent provider. You should not feel like you need to educate providers about the basic concepts of LGBTQI identities. To prevent that, consider asking the following questions:

- My identity is \_\_\_\_\_. What experience do you have working with people with that identity?
- What experience do you have with the LGBTQI community?
- Do you have any specific training or certifications that relate to working with LGBTQI clients?

Additionally, to avoid selecting a practitioner that uses the discredited and harmful practice of conversion or reparative therapy — aimed at changing a person's sexual orientation or gender identity — you may also want to ask, "Do you provide conversion therapy or reparative therapy?" and follow up by asking how they feel about that specific practice to make sure you are not selecting a provider that advocates for this type of treatment.

#### **Step 5: Build a Relationship**

It may take several calls to find the right provider for you. If the provider does not have the knowledge or experience that you are looking for, you can move on to the next provider and keep searching.

Remember, you are seeking a person that is going to help you improve your mental health. By stating your needs and asking the right questions, you can find someone who can mindfully address your identity throughout the duration of your treatment.

In partnership,

**Rodney A. Valandra, MA, LPCC, LMHC, NCC**

**Director of Student Counseling Services**

**University of Pittsburgh at Bradford**