

## LGBT Mental Health Fact Sheet

According to the Pan-American Health Organization, an estimated 19-24% of the population of the Americas experience mental illness in a given year.<sup>1</sup> Just like everyone else, lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) people also experience mental illness. But because homophobia remains widespread, LGBT people in Guyana and many other Caribbean countries are especially vulnerable to mental health problems, especially depression, anxiety and substance abuse disorders.<sup>2</sup> LGBT people often face discrimination in the public sphere, which taxes their emotional and physical wellbeing. Even when they try to access health services they often experience discrimination, which compounds the problem because they cannot benefit from the support that others do.

The burden of often being ostracized and distanced from normative potentials can begin very early in a LGBT person's life. Adolescence is a challenging period for all people. Transitioning into adulthood entails taking on increasing levels of responsibility, and at this stage in the life course young people wrangle with questions about identity and where and how to find a place in the world. When LGBT youth challenge the normative rules of sexuality and gender this leaves them vulnerable to the threat posed by heterosexual peers, with the penalty of crossing the line of 'normalcy' resulting in emotional and physical pain. Keeping one's sexual orientation hidden from others (being "in the closet") and fear of having one's sexual orientation disclosed (being "outed") can add significantly to the stress.

Being lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender is not a mental illness itself. Beyond the grief experienced due to homophobia(s), sexual orientation and gender identity have nothing to do with whether any given person will become anxious, depressed, or whatever else. Homosexuality, bisexuality and transgenderism do not impair judgment, stability, reliability, or general social and vocational capabilities. But precisely because LGBT persons face unique risks to their mental well-being, it is imperative that Guyana's public health system is designed and managed in such a way that LGBT people can access health care without fear of judgment and discrimination, with health service providers, above all, acknowledging that a person's right to health is a human right, enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> PAHO/WHO. 2014. Ministers of Health of the Americas Pledge Action to Improve Mental Health Care. Washington, DC.

<sup>2</sup> IDAHOT. 2014. Guyana: Country Report. IDAHOT Committee.

<sup>3</sup> OHCHR. 2008. The Right to Health. Fact Sheet No. 31. Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, Geneva.

### A note on terminology

The term "LGBT" is commonly used as shorthand for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people. Importantly, though these groups may share some similarities, they are by no means identical in terms of their mental health issues, concerns or needs.

While the terms lesbian, gay and bisexual (and heterosexual) refer to someone's sexual orientation, **transgender** is a term related to gender identity, or someone's sense of being a man or woman, boy or girl. Transgender people are heterosexual, gay, lesbian, and bisexual.

**Lesbian** (or gay woman) refers to a woman who is romantically and emotionally attracted to other women.

The term **gay** typically refers to a man who is romantically and emotionally attracted to other men.

**Bisexual** refers to someone who is romantically and emotionally attracted to men and women. Being bisexual does not necessarily mean someone is involved in multiple relationships at the same time.

## Special Conditions

### Dual or Double Stigma

Mental illness is regrettably still stigmatized in Guyanese society. So too is being lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender. As such, a LGBT person with mental illness may be in the unfortunate position of having to contend with *both* stigmas. It is often the case that LGBT people experience a Guyanese mental health care system that is not comfortable or sensitive to issues related to sexual orientation and gender identity. At the same time however, many LGBT Guyanese are not sensitive or educated about serious mental health issues. Each of these realities can contribute to and exacerbate existing mental health problems.

### Family Support

People with mental illness often rely on family support. However, for some LGBT people, families are not accepting of their sexual orientation or gender identity. In extreme cases, LGBT people are disowned or kicked out of their homes, which leaves them without an important source of support. Their options few and far between, some of the homeless turn to employment in the sex trade as a means of survival. Lack of family support may contribute to more vulnerability among the LGBT population, underscoring just how important it is for LGBT people to have access to affirming, supportive, and culturally appropriate mental health services.

### Violence

The societal stigma and prejudice against LGBT people takes many forms. This includes verbal or physical violence, which represent serious violations of basic human rights. Experiences of violence can have significant and enduring consequences for mental health. Guyanese newspapers often feature stories about people being victimized on the basis of their sexual orientation, gender identity and gender expression. In the experience of Guyana's Society Against Sexual Orientation Discrimination (SASOD), victims of violence and abuse often present lasting symptoms of depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress. Mental health providers need to be aware of this issue and the potential negative effects it can have on LGBT peoples' mental health and well-being.

### Internalized Homophobia

*Homophobia* refers to irrational fear or hatred of LGBT people. Sometimes LGBT people turn society's negative view about them inward, or *internalize* it. This can affect psychological well-being and can have consequences for healthy development, particularly among youth. Again, mental health providers in Guyana need to be aware of the issue of stigma and how it may affect mental health and well-being among LGBT clients and patients.

In sum, LGBT people do not by definition have a mental illness, but then have to contend with societal stigma and negative experiences that likely contribute to an increased vulnerability to mental illness. It is important to note, however, that despite this, most LGBT people ultimately live happy and healthy lives!

Some women and men may engage in same-sex behaviour yet still identify as heterosexual, and some lesbian or gay people may have sexual relationships with people of the other sex. It is important not to make assumptions or judge people when it comes to sexual orientation, gender identity or gender expression.

LGBT people are just as diverse as everyone else. LGBT people are old, young, rich, poor, parents, children, friends, co-workers, Indo-Guyanese, Afro-Guyanese, Amerindians, and on and on. LGBT people are everywhere and in every community!

### Resources

Guyana Foundation  
178 Hague Back,  
W.C. Demerara, Guyana.  
[www.guyanafoundation.com](http://www.guyanafoundation.com)

Mental Health Unit, Ministry of Health  
1 Brickdam, Stabroek  
Georgetown, Guyana  
[www.health.gov.gy](http://www.health.gov.gy)

SASOD is grateful for the support of Wendy Bostwick, Ph.D., National (US) Alliance on Mental Health.  
[www.nami.org](http://www.nami.org)