

Look After Yourself,
Look After Your Mental Health.

Information for Lesbian, Gay,
Bisexual and Transgender People

www.yourmentalhealth.ie
www.letsomeoneknow.ie

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'Mental health' – what does that mean?

Good mental health means you can cope with the normal stresses of life, you realise your abilities, you can work productively and are able to make a contribution to your community. Your mental health is an important part of you; it's an important part of everyone. It's about how we see and feel about ourselves and those around us – our family, our friends, classmates and colleague – people we see every day. When our mental health is good we can enjoy day to day life and we can get the best out of things. Good mental health also helps us deal with problems and tough times in our lives.

Supporting LGBT people's mental health

This booklet has been developed by GLEN and BeLonG To Youth Service and was funded and published by the HSE National Office for Suicide Prevention. Negative life experiences can be stressful and this stress can affect our mental health. Homophobia and transphobia can lead to specific stresses for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) people that can also have a negative impact on their mental health. This booklet provides information for LGBT people on how they can look after their mental health and highlights the services available if LGBT people need support.

Looking after yourself

We all need to look after our mental health and just like physical health it needs to be maintained. Looking after yourself is the best way to maintain good mental health. Here are ten things you can do to look after your mental health:

1. Accept yourself

We're all different, but the one thing we have in common is that none of us are perfect. We all have a mix of strengths and weaknesses and that's part of what makes us human. Be nice and take good care of yourself. Going easy on yourself will help you feel better and is good for your mental health.

Accepting yourself as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual or Transgender can sometimes be made more difficult because of a fear of how people will react to you, or because of experiences of homophobia or transphobia. Try not to be too hard on yourself, and if you are finding things difficult, seek support from one of the organisations listed at the back of this booklet (see pages 14 and 16).

2. Get involved

Having things to do which occupy your mind or that get you involved with people is good for your mental health. Meeting people and getting involved in new things can make all the difference – for you and for others. Join a group or a club. Get involved in a community activity or organisation. Or meet up with friends. Being involved with others will help you feel better.

3. Keep active

Regular exercise can really give your mental health a boost. Find something active you enjoy – sport, swimming, walking, dancing or cycling – and decide when you are going to do it. It might be an effort but it will be worth it. The more fun it is, the better the effect on your mental health.

4. Eat well

Having a balanced diet will not only help the way you feel, but it will also help the way you think. Try to eat regularly and aim to eat five portions of fruit and vegetables every day. Good food is essential for your mind and body to work properly. However, it can be good to treat yourself from time to time and have exactly what you want.

5. Keep in contact

Friends are important, so it's good to keep up contact with them. This is especially true at those times when you don't feel like being in touch with anyone. So send a text, make a call, log onto Bebo/Facebook, or even better arrange to meet up with a friend. Making new friends can be difficult but getting involved in social activities or a group is a great way of meeting new people.

6. Relax

Relaxation is good for your mental health so doing things that make you feel calm are helpful. Fit things into your day and week that help you unwind, like listening to music, reading or watching a film.

7. Don't binge drink

Drinking alcohol to deal with problems will only make things worse. It is best to drink in a safe way, in moderation and avoid binge-drinking. Overdoing it can damage your health and won't help you deal with the cause of your worries. Alcohol is a depressant and overdoing it can increase anxiety and lead to depression.

8. Talk about it

You don't have to appear to be strong and struggle on alone. When you're upset or feeling low, talking about how you feel will help. Talk to someone you trust and if you feel there is nobody to talk to, call a helpline such as one of the LGBT helplines (see list on page 14 or visit www.lgbt.ie). People will listen and give you support if you let them know how you're feeling.

9. Ask for help

When we're feeling down or anxious it can be hard to open up and let people know. But asking for help in tough times is a sign of strength. You might worry about how people will react but when you let someone know you need their help, they usually respond positively. Take the step to let someone know you need help. As the saying goes, a problem shared is a problem halved.

10. Do something you enjoy

Whether it's watching your favourite film, cooking a nice meal, sports or a hobby, we all have things we love to do. Doing something you enjoy if you're not feeling great will help you feel better.

A friend in need...

Problems with friends or family, work or school as well as normal everyday stress can make you feel upset, irritable, over-sensitive, apathetic or withdrawn. These feelings are normal and usually pass, but if they don't go away they can be a sign of a mental health problem.

Other signs that might indicate a mental health problem are:

- Withdrawal from friends, family, school, work, sports or other things that are usually enjoyable
- A major change in mood or inappropriate responses to certain situations
- Disturbed sleep – either not getting enough or sleeping too much
- Disturbed eating patterns – either eating less than normal or over-eating
- Pre-occupation and obsession about a particular issue
- Lack of care for personal appearance or personal responsibilities
- A drop in performance or participation at work, at school or in hobbies
- Doing things that don't make sense to others or hearing or seeing things that nobody else can hear or see

If you think that someone you know might be having problems, look out for the signs listed above and talk to them about it. Most people will turn to a friend for support during tough times, so being there for your friends can really help.

Remember, it is important to look after your own mental health, so don't take on more than you feel comfortable with. Talk to someone about your concerns. You are not responsible for everyone else, but you can offer support. It can be a huge worry if someone tells you they have thoughts of self-harm or suicide. Sometimes they don't want you to tell anyone else, but you must explain to them that you can't keep this to yourself and that you can help them get the support they need. If someone confides in you, it means they are reaching out for help. If they didn't want help, they wouldn't have told you.

What life can throw at us...

As we go through life, we all experience change and transition. Negative life experiences can be stressful and this stress can affect our mental health. Stresses such as relationship problems or losing a loved one can be experienced by anyone. Homophobia and transphobia can lead to specific stresses for LGBT people and this can also have a negative impact on your mental health. Most people know they are LGBT for some time before they tell others. When someone is considering coming out, they may be afraid that family and friends will reject them if they know they are LGBT. This can be a lonely and worrying time and can put a strain on our mental health. Young LGBT people have to deal with the normal stresses of growing up as well as other stresses like isolation, name-calling and homophobic bullying.

Bullying or harassment

Many people will experience bullying. Anyone can be bullied but LGBT people can also experience homophobic/transphobic bullying or harassment. It can happen anywhere, such as the classroom, the workplace, sporting field or the home. Being a victim of bullying may lead you to feel upset, threatened, humiliated or vulnerable.

Bullying and harassment can cause physical, mental and social pain and can make you feel alone, scared, angry, confused or sad. All of these can affect your mental health. If you experience bullying or harassment, talk to someone about it, whether it's a colleague, school counsellor, family member, friend or your doctor.

Losing a loved one

At some point in our lives we all experience the pain of losing someone we love through death. Bereavement can have a serious impact on your health. When someone dies, you enter the process of grieving. There is no right or wrong way to grieve and you can experience a wide range of emotions as you come to terms with someone's death. Normal feelings include being

stunned at the loss, sadness or depression, longing for the person who has died, anger towards yourself or others, regret over a last encounter or regret that something was left unsaid. All of this can be part of the grieving process.

Eventually, the shock of bereavement and the strength of your feelings should begin to fade, but it does take time to go through this process and it may affect your mental health. If this happens, it is important to get help through your doctor, a bereavement support group or your local mental health service (www.hse.ie).

When an LGBT person loses their partner they may not get the same reaction or support that a heterosexual person gets when they lose their spouse or partner. People may fail to appreciate what your partner meant to you and the love you had for each other. Experiences like this can make grieving all the more difficult for LGBT people. The booklet *Coping with the death of your same-sex partner* was developed by GLEN and the Irish Hospice Foundation and is available at www.glen.ie

Relationship problems

Sometimes relationships can be a source of pressure for people, pressure to be someone you're not or to do things you're unsure about. This can put a strain on your mental health. Developing a new relationship can also make it difficult for you to find enough time for your friends and family. When you begin a relationship with a new partner, it is important to keep working on your existing friendships and family relationships as well as your new relationship.

Relationship break-up can also have a powerful impact on your mental health, bringing a range of emotions, such as uncertainty for the future, anger, sadness, loneliness and isolation, and often a sense of failure. Relationship break-up can be more difficult if you are a parent as you also have to deal with the impact on your children. It can be difficult to adjust to new circumstances and this can affect your mental health. It is important to get support to help you through this difficult time (see page 14 to 16).

Coming out

For many LGBT people, coming out can be a challenging time. It is common for LGBT people to be afraid that family and friends might reject them when they find out they are LGBT. This can put a strain on your mental health. But coming out can also be an exhilarating and rewarding experience which in itself can improve your mental health. Most people have a positive experience when they come out to family and friends. It is a good idea to prepare before coming out to a family member, friend or colleague. You may want to consider some of the following:

- Think about who you want to come out to. Why are you coming out to this particular person?
- Think about the location and timing of where and when you are going to come out. Will you have a private space to talk uninterrupted? If you are fearful of a negative reaction, choose a location where you feel safe
- Time to digest – people will react in different ways to you coming out. Give them some time to take in the news

Lack of support from family or friends

Some LGBT people can experience a lack of support from family and friends. This may happen when someone first comes out, when they get into a relationship, start a family or when a relationship ends. This can manifest in any number of ways and can be hurtful, and even detrimental to your mental health. Sometimes families, in particular parents, may not know how to adequately support LGBT family members and may need some support themselves. Information and support is available for LGBT people and their parents from a wide variety of organisations (see list of support services on pages 14 and 16).

Feel like you can't cope?

Problems with alcohol or drugs

Alcohol and drug misuse can damage your mental health. Signs that alcohol or drugs are becoming a serious problem include:

- Becoming dependent on alcohol or drugs – dependence means you need alcohol or drugs to get through the day or to deal with everyday situations
- Letting alcohol or drugs begin to affect your relationships, school/work or family life – friends and family expressing concern about your drinking or school/work performance being affected by alcohol or drug-taking

If you are concerned about your alcohol or drug use or someone else's, talk to a family member or someone you trust. Support is available if you want to talk to someone in confidence about your concerns. BeLonG To runs a dedicated Drugs Education and Support Service for LGBT young people aged 14-23. For further information or to talk to a Drugs Education & Outreach Worker please visit www.belongto.org (see also list of support services on pages 14 and 16).

Self-harm and feeling suicidal

Self-harm means inflicting injury or harm on yourself as a way of dealing with emotional distress. Sometimes distressing problems can appear permanent and it can seem that things will never get better. This can be a scary and lonely place to be. Some people use self-harm as a way to try to escape from or deal with pain or stress that they cannot tolerate in their lives. For LGBT people this may or may not be related to being LGBT. Sometimes LGBT people may self-harm because of the emotional distress caused by experiences such as fear of rejection or homophobic bullying.

If you have self-harmed or are thinking about it, there are people who can help you work through your problems who will not judge you. Talk to someone about how you feel. If you would prefer to talk to someone without giving your name, there are helplines and organisations that can help (see list of support services on pages 14 and 16).

Having thoughts of suicide is not uncommon. But it is very important to know that if you are having these thoughts, you need help and support to deal with whatever is causing you to feel this way. Every problem has a solution, but sometimes because you are feeling so low you can't see it. You are not alone and there are people who can help you find a solution and work through your problems, no matter how difficult they appear to you. Talk to someone you can trust and tell them how you are feeling. If there is nobody you can talk to call the Samaritans on 1850 60 90 90 (who are available 24 hours a day every day of the year to provide emotional support to anyone who calls) or call another helpline (see page 14 to 16).

Need help now?

If you, or someone you know, is in urgent need or in crisis now and need someone to talk to:

- Contact your local doctor, listed under 'General Practitioners' in the Golden Pages or visit www.icgp.ie
- Go to, or contact, the Accident and Emergency Department of your nearest general hospital
- Contact the emergency services by calling 999 or 112
- Contact Samaritans on 1850 60 90 90 (Republic of Ireland) or 08457 909 090 (Northern Ireland)

Common mental health problems

While some mental health problems are fairly common they are sometimes misunderstood. This is a brief outline of some of these problems. If you are concerned that you, or someone you know, might be showing signs of a mental health problem, it is important to get support. Support can range from informal help from friends or family, advice from your doctor, counselling or medication. A list of supports, including LGBT services, is included at the back of this booklet (pages 14 and 16).

Anxiety

Anxiety is a common experience for both men and women. Depending on the type and severity of anxiety, it can have a damaging impact on your quality of life. For some, anxiety can be a passing emotion attached to stressful situations such as exams, getting married or work pressures. For others, it is more than this. The signs associated with anxiety can include a racing heart, rapid breathing, feelings of panic, sweating, excessive and undue worrying, disturbed sleep, tense muscles, morbid thoughts and fear of going mad.

Although in some instances your anxiety may have no apparent cause, people who are considered most 'at risk' of developing an anxiety disorder include those who have undergone a major life event such as bereavement, a relationship break-up or unemployment; those who misuse drugs and alcohol; or those with a family history of anxiety. For LGBT people, anxiety can be strongly linked to the fear of rejection by family and friends before coming out. Lack of support, isolation or harassment/bullying can also lead to anxiety for LGBT people.

Depression

We all feel fed up, miserable or sad from time to time. These feelings don't usually last longer than a few days or a week, and they don't interfere too much with our lives. Sometimes there's a reason, but sometimes these feelings just come out of the blue. We usually cope with them ourselves. We may have a chat with a friend but don't otherwise need any help.

Symptoms of depression include:

- feelings of sadness or hopelessness
- difficulty with daily activities
- difficulty concentrating
- changes in sleeping or eating patterns

You may be depressed, or experiencing depression, when:

- the symptoms of depression last for two weeks or more, and
- the symptoms interfere with your everyday life

Depression can occur from a young age or can come late in life. It can also be associated with physical health problems or negative experiences such as homophobic bullying or isolation. The symptoms of depression, regardless of your life stage or circumstances, should be taken seriously and never dismissed.

The feeling of depression is much more powerful and unpleasant than the short episodes of unhappiness that we all experience from time to time. Due to the length of time it lasts and its impact on your life and relationships, you need to get help for depression as soon as possible (see pages 14 and 16).

Bipolar disorder

Bipolar disorder used to be called 'manic depression'. As the name suggests, it is characterised by mood swings that are beyond what most people experience in their lives, although they can also be subtle and gradual. With

bipolar disorder, moods can swing between low, high and mixed. A low mood involves feelings of intense depression and despair. This is known as a depression and symptoms include those listed above. A high mood involves feelings of elation. This is also known as mania or a manic period. Symptoms include impaired judgement, over-spending, too much energy and little need for sleep, anger or irritability and unrealistic beliefs in one's own abilities.

A mixed mood involves, for example, depressed mood with the restlessness and over activity of a manic episode. People usually experience both depressive and manic episodes, but some will have only manic episodes. Bipolar disorder affects about one in every 100 adults. It can start at any time during or after the teenage years, although it is unusual for it to start after the age of 40. Men and women are affected equally.

Schizophrenia

Schizophrenia is a serious mental illness marked by disturbances in your thoughts, perceptions, emotions and behaviour. It affects about one in every 100 people worldwide. It is rare before the age of 15, but it can start any time after this, most often between the ages of 15 and 35.

The symptoms of schizophrenia are broken into two groups: 'positive' and 'negative' symptoms. Positive symptoms include the more recognisable things like hallucinations, hearing voices, delusions, muddled thinking and feeling that you are being controlled. 'Negative' symptoms are less easy to spot and include a loss of energy, enthusiasm and motivation, difficulty concentrating and uneasiness in other people's company.

People with schizophrenia can and do recover. For more information, contact Shine on 1890 621 631 or log onto www.shineonline.ie

Support services – there is help out there

The services listed below have a lot of experience in helping people to overcome their problems. If you would like to talk to someone in confidence, they can help.

Please note: this is not a complete list of support services. Your local HSE Health Office will be able to provide a more detailed guide to support services available in your area. Call 1850 24 1850 or log onto www.hse.ie for contact details.

Mental Health Support Services

Samaritans 1850 60 90 90, www.samaritans.org, jo@samaritans.org

Childline 1800 66 66 66, www.childline.ie

Teenline 1800 833 634, www.teenline.ie

Aware (Depression) 1890 303 302, www.aware.ie, wecanhelp@aware.ie

Pieta House (Self-Harm/Suicide Support) 01-6010000,
www.pieta.ie, mary@pieta.ie

Bodywhys (Eating Disorders) 1890 200 444,
www.bodywhys.ie, alex@bodywhys.ie

Console (Suicide Bereavement Support) 1800 201 890, www.console.ie

Grow (Mental Health Support Groups) 1890 474 474, www.grow.ie

Alcoholics Anonymous www.alcoholicsanonymous.ie

Mental Health Ireland www.mentalhealthireland.ie

Support for Young LGBT People

BeLonG To Youth Services 01-6706223 info@belongto.org

For a full list of LGBT youth supports around the country please see
www.belongto.org

LGBT Helplines

Cork Lesbian Line: 021-4318318

Dublin Lesbian Line: 01-8729911

Dundalk Outcomers Helpline: 042-9353035

Gay Information Cork: 021-4271087

Gay Switchboard Dublin: 01-8721055

Limerick Gay & Lesbian Helpline: 061-310101

Outwest Helpline: 094-9372479

TENI Helpline: (Transgender Support) 085-1477166

Numbers for all LGBT helplines can be found at www.lgbt.ie

LGBT Centres and Groups

Dundalk Outcomers 042-9329816 www.outcomers.org

Gay Men's Health Service 01-8734952 gmpoutreach@eircom.net

L.inC (Lesbians in Cork) 021-4808600 www.linc.ie

The Other Place (Cork) 021-4278470 www.theotherplacecork.com

Outhouse Community Centre Dublin 01-8734932 www.outhouse.ie

Outwest Ireland 087-9725586 www.outwestireland.ie

Rainbow Support Service Midwest 061-310101

www.rainbowsupportservices.org

South Waterford 086-2147633 www.southgroup.wetpaint.com

Transgender Equality Network Ireland (TENI) 085 147 7166 www.teni.ie

Support for Parents

LOOK (Parent Support) 087-2537699 www.lovingouroutkids.org

Parent Support in Cork 021- 4304884 info@gayprojectcork.com

Internet support

A number of support services are now using the internet to reach out to people. Some examples are:

www.yourmentalhealth.ie

www.letsomeoneknow.ie

www.spunout.ie

www.reachout.com

www.belongto.org

www.heads-away-just-say.com/

These services offer mental health information and signposting to other services.

Social, sports and cultural activities

Check Gay Community News, the monthly LGBT magazine, at www.gcn.ie for a detailed list of LGBT social, cultural and sporting groups and organisations and online forums.





More Information : www.glen.ie & www.belongto.org