Mental health in the LGBT community
Members of the LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender) community experience the same mental health disorders as those who are heterosexual; they do not have a genetic predisposition to experience specific disorders. However, the LGBT community is often subjected to a number of life experiences that can contribute to poor mental health. In some countries such as Australia, this results in the LGBT community having the poorest mental health in the country. This is why LGBT mental health needs to be discussed in more detail.

You’ll notice this brochure often uses the term LGBT when looking at a number of studies. Whilst we are aware that there are a vast number of gender and sexual identities that people use to identify themselves, there is limited psychological research in this field, and as such, in many cases, the term LGBT will be used. If studies have distinguished between different identities then we shall make this clear. Whilst this grouping increases the pool of information to look at, we do acknowledge research out of New Zealand that highlights the problems with this grouping, primarily that sub-sets of the LGBT+ community may experience certain conditions more frequently than others.

It is worth noting here some potential reasons for the lack of research in this field. In the UK, it has been found that clinicians are often reluctant to ask patients their sexual identity and many patients are reluctant to freely share this information. This means that any statistics provided by medical institutions are likely to be under-representative. The poor history of the psychological community and the LGBT community may also be a problem for many people when it comes to studies. The history of mental health unfortunately includes classifications of homosexuality as a mental illness, as well as conversion therapy to attempt to ‘cure’ this. Whilst we are able to say that many countries have moved past this barbaric practice, some older generations may still remember this and be reluctant to partake in any research. This may explain why many studies of LGBT mental health are aimed at younger adults and adolescents.

Another major roadblock in gaining information on LGBT mental health worldwide is the number of countries that still outlaw homosexuality. Currently 74 countries list homosexuality as illegal, with 12 countries punishing it with the death penalty. Other countries may have legalised homosexuality, but have continually changing laws that threaten to impact the freedoms of the LGBT community; therefore partaking in psychological studies and data collection may be a risk to a person’s life. Cultural feelings in countries which have recently declassified homosexuality, such as China, are also likely to affect statistical collection. Therefore, information from these countries is extremely limited, which is unfortunate as it is likely that the LGBT community in these countries is greatly suffering.
Why are those in the LGBT community at risk of poor mental health?

Along with the aforementioned criminal implications of being LGBT in some regions of the world, there are also everyday events globally, that unfortunately put the mental health of the LGBT community at risk. Identity problems can cause conflict that leads to mental health problems. For example, concealing one’s sexuality leads a person to act in a way that is not true to themselves in public, and in a way that does not reflect their identity. Doing this over a long period of time is likely to result in internal conflicts regarding who a person is. Questioning sexual identity can also lead a person to question other aspects of their identity, especially religious beliefs as these may go against the person’s newly discovered sexual identity. This can again lead to internal conflict and stress, making people vulnerable to mental health problems.

A Canadian study found that all people require three basic determinants for positive mental health; social inclusion, freedom from violence and discrimination, and access to economic resources. They also found that the LGBTQ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Questioning) community in Ontario were impacted by all three factors. Australian researchers have also found that the LGBT community are almost twice as likely to experience high or very high levels of psychological distress which makes them particularly vulnerable to mental health problems.

New Zealand has also found that the mental health of the LGBT community is impacted by regular exposure to psychological stressors like those associated with anti-LGBT attitudes. Importantly, they also confirmed that sexual orientation is not a cause of mental health problems. Instead it is the discrimination that causes the problems. Unfortunately, this discrimination often includes bullying and violence, which studies worldwide are showing to be a large problem. In fact a UK study found that over half of LGB (Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual) students had experienced direct bullying and that this directly increased the risk of mental health problems, including suicide.

Bullying was thought to be the cause of suicide ideation and self-harm in 41% of respondents in the study. The situation in the USA is no better than the UK, with one study finding that students who questioned their sexuality were more likely to experience more direct bullying, homophobic victimisation and poorer mental health than either LGB students or heterosexual students. Bullying has continued to be shown as a direct cause of negative mental health in the USA, where it has been found that each instance of LGBT victimisation increased the likelihood of self-harm by an average of 2.5. These statistics and studies clearly show that environmental experiences, especially those found in schools where bullying can be rampant, are direct causes of negative mental health in the LGBT community, highlighting key areas for authorities and councils to focus their efforts to reduce these harmful behaviours.

Identity problems can cause conflict that leads to mental health problems ...
Common mental health problems in the LGBT community

In the USA, the fear of coming out and being discriminated against has been shown to potentially lead to depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, suicidal thoughts and self-harm. Unfortunately this trend continues in a number of countries worldwide. Researchers from Canada found similar results, but also found increased levels of anxiety, obsessive-compulsive and phobic disorders, as well as higher rates of substance abuse. When New Zealand researchers took this further, they found that substance abuse was more likely to occur in those identifying as bisexual than heterosexual, and was no more common in lesbian or gay individuals than in heterosexuals.

Below is a selection of mental health conditions that commonly occur in the LGBT communities globally. As previously stated it is important to remember that LGBT community members can be impacted by the same disorders as the heterosexual community, but due to life events these conditions may become more prevalent.

**Self-harm** – Self harming is any act in which a person deliberately causes harm to themselves, such as cutting. Self-harm does not have the intention of resulting in suicide but unfortunately this is sometimes an unintended side effect. In the UK it is thought that half of gay young people harm themselves; the comparison for heterosexual young people is estimated to be 1 in 10-15 self-harms.

**Eating disorders** – The term eating disorders can incorporate a number of behaviours but is often used to refer to anorexia nervosa, bulimia nervosa and binge eating disorder. In the UK it is estimated that 1 in 5 gay or bisexual women has an eating disorder, compared to 1 in 20 in the population as a whole.
Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) – PTSD is often triggered by traumatic experience and causes the sufferer to experience symptoms such as flashbacks and regular nightmares. In Canada, the LGBTQ community has been found to be at double the risk of PTSD compared to the heterosexual community.

Depression – Depression involves an extended period, weeks to months, of low mood and unhappiness. Whilst there are a number of symptoms, common signs are fatigue and increased episodes of crying. Depression can result in an inability to function in day to day life. In the UK, LGB people are two to three more times as likely to suffer from depression, than their heterosexual counterparts. This is the same for the LBGTQ community in the USA. In Australia 36.2% of trans and 24.4% of LGB Australians meet the criteria for major depressions. A stark increase on the 6.8% estimate for the general population.

Substance abuse – Substance abuse is where a person becomes dependent on a substance to function. This is usually an illicit drug or alcohol. When a person is dependent, then an absence of the substance can cause withdrawal symptoms. In Canada, it is thought that the LGBT community is 2-4 times more likely to abuse alcohol and illicit substances. In the UK, the LGB community is more likely to use drugs across all age groups. In fact, estimates suggest that usage is likely to be seven times higher than the general population. In the USA an estimated 20-30% of the LGBTQ community abuse substances which is substantially over double the 9% estimate for the general population. When it comes to the binge drinking of alcohol, the LGB community in the UK is estimated to be twice as susceptible to this as their heterosexual counterparts. In the USA, a quarter of the LGBT community is thought to abuse alcohol, compared to 5-10% of the general population.
Suicide in the LGBT community

As with many marginalised groups in society, suicide is unfortunately a problem within the LGBT community globally. As with other mental health conditions, people who identify as LGBT are not more predisposed to suicide, instead it is the psychological stressors that they experience that drives them to suicide and suicidal thoughts. If you are currently reading this and feel you may be suicidal, then we urge you to please seek immediate medical advice. A number of helplines worldwide can be found on our website.

When it comes to suicide amongst the LGBT community, the statistics are somewhat startling. In Canada, the LGBTQ youth community is approximately 14 times more at risk of suicide and substance abuse than their heterosexual counterparts. Other Canadian studies have supported this increased risk, finding that 33% of LGB youth had made a suicide attempt, compared to 7% of youth overall. Suicidal thoughts are also at alarming levels, with over half of LGB students in Canada having thought about suicide, this number increases to almost three quarters when just looking at lesbian and bisexual females. The picture in the USA is not better, with suicide being one of the leading causes of death amongst 10-24 year olds in the LGBTQ community; with LGBTQ youth being up to four times more likely than their heterosexual counterparts to engage in thoughts and behaviours associated with suicide. Highlighting the extent to which this is a global issue, UK and Japanese studies have found similar problems. The UK estimates that 44% of 16-24 year old LGBT individuals have considered suicide and that LGB people are twice as likely as heterosexual people to attempt suicide. Japanese researchers found that in a sample of LGBT boys, aged 10-19 years old, 65% had contemplated suicide and 16% had attempted it.

Transgender individuals are often considered independently of LGB individuals when it comes to suicidal statistics. Unfortunately this is likely due to how prevalent suicide ideation and suicide attempts are in this community. In the UK alone, nearly half of the transgender community under the age of 26 years old stated they had attempted suicide and 59% disclosed they had considered suicide. Unfortunately, these figures are mirrored across the globe with locations such as Ontario, Canada reporting 77% of transgender study respondents had seriously thought about suicide and 45% has attempted it. Australia rates LGBTI (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Intersex) suicidality rates as the highest in the country and found up to 50% of transgender people have attempted suicide in their lives. Alarminglly, 20% of the Australian transgender community and 15.7% of the Australian LGB community are thought to currently suffer from suicidal ideation.

Regrettably in some instances, families can reject an individual for coming forward about their sexual identity. Unsurprisingly, this can cause a great deal of distress for the person and leads to an increase in the risk of suicide. Studies out of the USA and Canada have found that LGB individuals who are rejected by their families are over eight times more likely to attempt suicide than those who were not rejected. This figure is alarming but is unsurprising given the turmoil and identity crisis a person is likely to suffer at the rejection of oneself by their family at a time that is already highly psychologically stressful.

Needless to say these figures highlight a substantial global problem that is not reserved for Western cultures or one single region of the globe. It is likely that those countries where statistics are not as readily available will have a comparable problem, with instances of suicidal ideation likely to drastically increase in those regions where being LGBT is illegal. These figures also highlight a need for further care to be made available to this group of society and for improved awareness and tolerance programmes to be made available worldwide.
What to do if you are suffering or know somebody who is suffering

If you a member of the LGBT community and feel you are suffering from a mental health problem then it is important to remember that you are not alone. Help is out there. It is important to share how you are feeling with somebody you trust, or alternatively a health care professional. Seeking help is not a sign of weakness, in fact it is a very brave thing to do. The sooner you are able to talk to somebody then the sooner you can get your life back on track. If you are currently feeling suicidal then we implore you to seek medical assistance immediately.

If you know a friend or loved one is suffering then it is important to be as supportive and compassionate as possible. Suffering from a mental health problem can be daunting, and the support of loved ones is vital in the recovery process.

For more information on how to deal with mental illness and for information on charity helplines please visit our website: www.theshawmindfoundation.org