

Gay Men’s Health Fact Sheet Series

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Mental health (or emotional health) can be described as how a person acts, thinks and/or feels and can be affected by the ups and downs of everyday life.

Some of the major mental health concerns of gay men may relate to the following key words:

- homosexuality
- eating disorders
- violence in relationships
- homophobia
- social isolation
- gay-bashing
- internalized homophobia
- self-identity
- self-esteem
- relationships
- gender identity
- rape
- coping
- stress
- depression
- substance use
- body image
- suicide

These issues, causes and symptoms are challenging to address. When our ability to function routinely is affected by them, it may be a sign of possible mental illness. Many illnesses share similar symptoms making diagnosis difficult. There are those who seek counselling and assistance in a proactive way to help sort things out and to feel confident and self-assured. Some forms of mental illness can be severe enough to warrant seeking out professional help. It is important to remember that we all have the skills and methods of coping on a day-to-day basis, sometimes we just need a little help.

Signs and Symptoms

The mind can have tremendous control over the body. Paying attention to the body’s reactions to different stimuli can give useful information related to the state of physical and mental health. Stress is the body’s physical response to a perceived demand or threat. Feelings of panic or fear help turn stress to distress.

The body or mind can be overwhelmed by what we may perceive as a demand or threat. If you are aware of how your body works under ‘normal’ stress, you can then look at any changes as signs of possible distress and take appropriate steps to lessen the effects of stress. The following are possible signs and symptoms of mental or physical problems. If you experience a prolonged period of any of these signs or symptoms it is best that you speak to a health care provider.

- appetite loss or gain
- pain or headaches
- feeling disorganized
- fear, anxiety or panic
- feeling burned out or stressed
- oversleeping, fatigue, insomnia
- loss of interest in sex
- unusual sexual behaviour

Some forms of mental illness can be severe enough to warrant seeking out professional help.

- changed social behaviour
- mood swings
- depression
- increased substance use
- memory loss
- loss of energy

Mental illnesses may be triggered by changes in the body or environment, by genetics, by traumatic events, or by the use of certain recreational drugs or medications. Mental health professionals are trained to identify possible triggers for a variety of mental illnesses. This can be done by asking about lives, homes, workplaces and recreation. If there is a family history of mental illness, be sure to inform the health care provider. These details can help diagnose the possibility of mental illness.

Suicide

Pretty much everyone has thought about suicide and what it would mean for them and their loved ones. For some these thoughts are short-lived, for others suicide is seen as an only option. Many more people attempt suicide than actually succeed. Studies have shown that gay youth make more attempts than their heterosexual peers. Adult gay men appear to make suicide attempts at around the same rate as heterosexual men.

Seriously entertaining the thought of suicide is a big warning sign to seek professional help. Sometimes in deep depression, a friend may be the link to a local suicide prevention centre, hospital emergency room or clinic. Helping to make a connection to a professional may keep a friend, and the friendship alive.

Gay Men and the Mental Health Profession

The mental health profession has done great harm to gay men in the past. It was a psychiatrist who coined the term “homosexual” in the late 1800s, and for a long time gay men were tested, labelled, arrested, shocked, drugged and diagnosed as being sick. Homosexuality was considered to be a disease. In

1973 the American Psychiatric Association removed homosexuality from its list of mental illnesses. However, simply changing the definition did not change society overnight. There are still psychiatrists who consider being gay a mental illness. There are many gay men and women who suffer the lingering effects of “cures” and “fixes” promoting doubt and distrust of the mental health profession.

In the last thirty years, the mental health profession has contributed much to the lives of gay men and women. Gay men and women work as psychiatrists, psychologists, therapists, counsellors, social workers and researchers.

The profession has widely recognized that homosexuals have unique mental health concerns. Researchers have conducted studies to establish practices to serve this population’s unique needs. These studies were published in journals devoted to homosexuality and gay and lesbian psychotherapy. A profession once known for its homophobic stance is becoming a progressive force in supporting the health of gay men, and slowly regaining their trust.

Choosing a Mental Health Provider

Being aware of areas of concern helps provide direction to a professional who has the skills to help. If the issues are specific, like substance use or body image, find someone who specializes in that kind of work. If there is more than one area of concern, a professional with a general counselling practice can provide links to specialists who may be able to help. The important thing is to find someone trustworthy, with whom discussion of all concerns can be done frankly and openly.

Try to find a gay-positive practitioner by asking friends and gay-friendly community agencies for names of mental health professionals they know and trust. Don’t be afraid to ask for an introductory visit to help decide if a particular mental health care provider’s style works for you.

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