

## TIPS WHEN DISCUSSING LGBTI PEOPLE'S RELATIONSHIPS

- When talking about people's relationships, there can be a tendency to use gendered language without realising it, or to assume sexuality descriptors. To use inclusive language, check how people identify before using words that assume their own or another person's gender or sexuality.
- Check how people describe their relationships, such as married, de-facto, open, or poly, and if unsure, use more neutral terms such as 'partner' or ask what terms someone prefers.
- Learn about different relationships, and be willing to take your cues from those you are working with. For example, a trans woman and her cisgender male boyfriend may prefer to be described as a straight couple instead of as a same-gender couple. Some intersex, trans and gender diverse people may identify as heterosexual, and some are married.
- Issues of sexuality and sexual practices may emerge as central for some LGBTI clients. It's important to make sure you are comfortable talking to LGBTI clients about their sexual relationships and practices before working therapeutically with such clients, and to educate yourself outside of the counselling relationship if you are not.
- LGBTI people are more likely to have had their choice of partner or relationship choices questioned by peers or family, or classified as wrong or less valid. Part of the therapeutic process may simply involve providing a

supportive space to talk openly about someone's life with a loving partner, or to explore feelings about existing, past or future relationships.

- If asked about renewal of relationships, counsellors and mental health professionals can assist map out their client's needs, relationship skills, coping skills and resilience. This may assist explore some of the risks and benefits about to renewal of relationships with former friends, family members or lost or unrequited love interests.

# RELATIONSHIPS

## A QLIFE GUIDE FOR HEALTH PROFESSIONALS

The relationships of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Intersex (LGBTI) people are diverse and varied. LGBTI people have relationships as spouses, partners, friends, carers, children, parents, neighbours and co-workers and may bring issues in any of these relationship areas to counselling.



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# LGBTI RELATIONSHIPS

Relationships and interpersonal issues are major reasons LGBTI people access counselling services. Minority stressors and continuous exposure to discrimination can contribute to LGBTI people being exposed to more relationship stressors than non-LGBTI people.

## LGBTI INTIMATE RELATIONSHIPS

Intimate relationships come in many forms for LGBTI people just as for non-LGBTI people. However, until recently, LGBTI people's intimate relationships were largely absent from public discussion unless portrayed in a negative light. Legal and cultural prohibitions have denied recognition to same-gender and other non-heterosexual couples, designating lesser status under the law and in many important societal practices. Due to this exclusion and invisibility, myths or presumptions can prevail, such as assuming LGBT relationships do not align with social norms such as long-term relationships and monogamy. In fact, many LGB couples have relationships similar to the patterns of traditional marriage or long-term de-facto relationships. For some trans and intersex people, their relationships are heterosexual while others may be same-gendered. Similar to non-LGBTI people, LGBTI people's relationships can have a range of features such as partners of differing ethnic backgrounds, relationships with partners older or younger than themselves, long-distance relationships or relationships where one person is a carer for their partner.

Some LGBTI people may be in relationships that they describe as polyamorous (or poly). Polyamory, also chosen by some heterosexual people, is the practice of honest, ethical multiple relationships, where all people involved are actively consenting to poly as a relationship choice. As an umbrella term, polyamory asserts that people are capable of loving more than one person intimately and sexually, and includes a wide variety of relationship styles and combinations, sexual orientations and practices. Another variation of non-monogamous relationships is an 'open relationship', where people create agreements about seeing other people. The parameters of an open relationship are up to the people involved and may include

arrangements such as a primary couple accepting one or both partners having short-term or longer term intimate relationships with others. Relationships that are poly or open are based on notions of honesty and consent, placing value on each person's wellbeing.

## THE ROLE AND IMPACT OF SECRECY

LGBTI clients may present with a range of common issues around forming and maintaining relationships and these may involve concerns about intimacy, sexual activities and communication. Many of these issues will be similar to problems experienced by non-LGBTI clients but the way they are experienced may be influenced or exacerbated by the experiences, tensions and stresses of negative social attitudes towards LGBTI people.

Myths, stigma or invisibility around LGBTI relationships can affect the way LGBTI people feel in social and community spaces, or in intimate relationships. LGBTI people may develop secrecy or feelings of fear or shame in response to discrimination, stigma and rejection. These are very real concerns for people subjected to laws and regulations that have restricted their rights in intimate relationships as well as their behaviours and bodies over a long period of time. If concealing aspects of their relationships, LGBTI people may internalise feelings of being "lesser than others" as well as not being able to let others into their inner lives, creating isolation and negative self-worth. When LGBTI people conceal their partner relationships from all but a few trusted people, feelings of worry, guilt or fear may develop. All of these factors can impact on a person's mental health and wellbeing.

Some LGBTI people feel that they cannot readily talk about their partner in some contexts or do everyday things like walk arm-in-arm down the street. This may be heightened for people where their family or community's religious or cultural practices are particularly unaccepting of LGBTI people, or due to fear or rejection or stigma in a smaller country town, or rural or remote regions. Even in the

suburbs or inner-city people hear comments such as, "I have nothing against gay people, by why do they have to make it obvious?". Displays of affection between opposite gender couples, such as holding hands or greeting a partner with a hug, draw little attention in most social arenas in Australia. However, for many LGBTI people, affection between couples can still elicit public disapproval or hostility, bringing stress and anxiety to day to day interactions.

**Intimate partner violence is believed to affect one in three LGBT people, including men, and this is a similar rate to that experienced by non-LGBT women.**

Studies have shown that as many as a third of LGBTI people do not tell their general practitioners they are LGBTI, effectively concealing key relationships in their lives. This lack of disclosure can be a direct result of fear of discrimination and stigma. In some cases, this non-disclosure may lead to omissions in clinical care, with a practitioner being without key information needed for planning treatment. For some LGBTI people, not disclosing about relationships, bodies and gender can not only cause emotional and mental pressure, it may contribute to worse physical health outcomes.

## DOMESTIC & INTIMATE PARTNER VIOLENCE

LGBTI people, just like any other people, can be at risk of domestic violence, where abuse, control and misuse of power occurs within a relationship. This can include a range of relationships such as family, housemates, and intimate partner relationships, including after a relationship has ended. Although somewhat under-researched, intimate partner violence is believed to affect one in three LGBT people, including men, and this is a similar rate to that experienced by non-LGBT women.

There can be specific features of intimate partner violence for LGBTI people such as threats or acts of outing of a person to family, workplaces or other people, or capitalising on the invisibility of a relationship or stigma to keep abuse and control hidden, including the notion that 'no-one will believe you'. While every circumstance is unique, there are also similarities in patterns of intimate partner violence regardless of the people in the relationship or the type or length of the relationship. It is important to avoid assumptions based on gender and relationship stereotypes, and to recognise that intimate partner abuse can be experienced by, or perpetrated by, people of all genders, bodies, ages, backgrounds, cultures, appearances and differing physical strengths or sizes. Working effectively with LGBTI people includes being aware of the risk of domestic, family or intimate partner violence, being willing to create opportunities for LGBTI people to identify

or disclose violence, and being able to respond with appropriate support and resources.

## RENEWING RELATIONSHIPS

Much like everybody else, LGBTI people will enjoy a variety of healthy friendships and relationships at varying stages of their life with people from different communities. However, presence of discrimination and issues such as familial pressure or rejection may contribute to an increased risk of relationship breakdowns.

Experiences such as coming out, the process of affirming gender identity, or intersex status integration may impact on an LGBTI person's breadth of social network or their ability to form meaningful relationships. For some LGBTI people, there can be times of wanting to renew relationships that have previously faltered or broken down. This could be with family members and friends who may have previously rejected their sexuality, gender identity or intersex characteristics. They may also wish to reconnect with people and potential romantic partners whom they feel they may not have been honest with in the past due to anxiety over their own identity, experience, history or characteristics.

Renewing relationships or connecting with others after a period of disconnection can be beneficial to some people, decreasing isolation and reducing feelings of loss or guilt. For others, the process of renewing relationships can be fraught and negatively impact mental health. It may be difficult for LGBTI people to reconnect with loved ones, friends or family where there is continued non-acceptance and continuing stigma.



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