

BE TRUE AND BE YOU

A Basic Mental Health Guide
for LGBTQ Teens

**EachMind
MATTERS**
California's Mental Health Movement

YOU'RE NOT ALONE

If you're LGBTQ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer and/or Questioning), and going through a tough time, you're not alone. Whether you're trying to figure out your own identity or want to learn how to talk to others, it can be hard to know where to find support. Being LGBTQ does not mean you have a mental illness, but it does put you at a higher risk for mental health challenges because of the stigma and discrimination you may face from family, friends and society. These pages don't have all the answers; in fact, this is just the beginning—a basic guide for how to talk and think about mental health and sexual orientation, some ways to cope with stress and emotions, and how to get support for yourself and others.

If nothing else, let this be a reminder that no matter what you're feeling, you're not alone.



Let's start with defining the terms we use to describe mental health, mental illness and sexual orientation. Often people form opinions about mental health and sexual orientation based on myths and mistruths, so it is helpful to have a clear understanding of what these terms mean.

MENTAL HEALTH

Health is the way your body feels and works. Being healthy means more than not being sick. Mental health means having good, helpful ways to deal with your emotions, thoughts and feelings. Having a healthy mind and body are both very important to help you deal with life.

**EVERYBODY
IS
MAKING IT
UP AS
THEY GO
ALONG**

ANXIETY

Anxiety is a feeling of fear that makes you feel uncomfortable and scared. Anxiety is a normal emotion that can help you deal with stressful situations, but some people feel anxious very often or very strongly. Sometimes people feel anxious even if there's nothing to be nervous about. Strong, sudden feelings of fear and anxiety are called "panic attacks." Anxiety and panic attacks that make it hard to live your daily life can be a sign of an anxiety disorder, which is a mental illness that only a doctor can diagnose. There are many ways to get help if anxiety makes it hard for you to do the things you need to do or keeps you from doing them altogether. Talking to a mental health professional can help a person find strategies and medications to help him/her manage these emotions and live a healthy life.

DEPRESSION

Depression is a mental illness that makes a person feel deep, lasting sadness that might not go away on its own. Depression can change the way you think, feel, and act, and can even make your body feel sick, too. Even if you have a good life, you can still feel depressed. It helps to talk to family or close friends if you are dealing with depression. Talking to a mental health professional can help a person find strategies and medications to help him/her manage these emotions and live a healthy life.

BIPOLAR DISORDER

Bipolar disorder is a mental illness that changes the way people feel emotions. Persons with bipolar disorder experience mood swings, which means they can go from happy to sad very quickly regardless of what is happening around them. Persons with bipolar disorder might not be able to control their emotions for a long period of time. When people with bipolar disorder experience intense feelings of happiness it is called "mania," which can make it hard to think clearly or sleep, and might cause them to do things without thinking about them first. When people with bipolar disorder feel intense sadness and tiredness it is called "depression." Sharing with friends or family can help, and talking to a mental health professional can help a person find strategies and medications to help him/her manage these emotions and live a healthy life.





PTSD

Sometimes if you see or live through something very scary or hurtful, you can keep feeling afraid even if you are safe now. It is normal to feel afraid sometimes, but people with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) may continue to feel scared for a long time after the event is over, even if they are no longer in any danger. PTSD can make you have bad dreams that seem real, or think that something bad will happen again. The strong feelings of fear, guilt or anger feel very real and can make it hard to go about your daily life. Talking to a mental health professional can help a person find strategies and medications to help him/her manage these emotions and live a healthy life.

SELF-HARM

Self-harm is a mental health challenge that causes a person to physically harm their body as a way of dealing with tough situations or painful feelings. Some examples of self-harm include intentionally cutting, burning, bruising, biting, pulling out hair or scratching yourself, usually in secret. These actions may provide brief relief but can cause lasting damage to your body and your mind. Recovery from these challenges can be very difficult, but is definitely possible. Talking to a mental health professional can help you understand your feelings and find healthy ways to process your emotions.

For more information on mental health challenges, visit www.ReachOutHere.com. The site has fact sheets, real stories, and tips for healthy ways to cope and get help.

For mental health care and support in your area, visit www.NetworkOfCare.org or call your county mental health department.

For more ways to get support, visit www.YourLifeYourVoice.org.

If you are having thoughts of harming yourself or you are being abused, call the Boys Town National Hotline at 1-800-448-3000. Counselors are available 24/7.

EATING DISORDERS

Eating disorders are mental health challenges that cause people to harm or exert control over their bodies as a way of dealing with tough situations or painful feelings. An eating disorder exists when a person's thoughts and behaviors become overly focused on food and body weight. Three of the most common eating disorders are anorexia, bulimia and extreme overeating or binging. Recovery from these challenges can be very difficult, but is definitely possible. A mental health professional, a doctor and a nutritionist can help you understand your feelings and find ways to heal your body and mind.

SEXUAL ORIENTATION

Sexual orientation is a term used to refer to a person's emotional, physical, romantic and erotic attractions to other people. Sexual orientation includes a person's feelings and sense of identity, which may or may not be evident in the way a person acts or dresses. Sexual orientation is often described using terms like straight, gay, lesbian, bisexual, asexual or queer. Because your sexual orientation is considered a part of your nature, it is not something you can choose or change, nor can anybody else decide your orientation for you. It is one piece of the big puzzle that makes you a unique individual.

GENDER IDENTITY

Gender identity is a person's sense and experience of being male (a man or boy), female (a woman or girl) or other gender (transgender or genderqueer). Sometimes, a person's assigned sex at birth doesn't match up with their gender identity in the way people usually expect. Your gender identity is not something that someone else can decide for you, because only you can determine how best to describe the way you understand and experience your own gender.

Looking for more information about sexual orientation, gender identity and coming out? Check out these support resources:

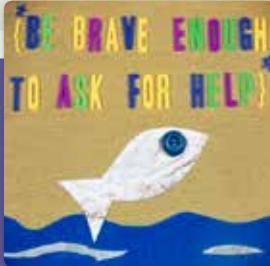
The Trevor Project
www.thetrevorproject.org

PFLAG
www.pflag.org/getsupport

Human Rights Campaign
www.hrc.org

GLBT National Youth Talkline
1-800-246-PRIDE (7743)
or www.glnh.org





MYTHS ~~AND~~ FACTS

Myth: People with mental illnesses are just weak and need to ‘snap out of it.’

Fact: A mental illness is not a sign of weakness. It's not something that is just ‘in your head’ or something that goes away if you are strong or smart enough. Mental illnesses are caused by a mix of what’s going on inside your body and what’s happening around you.

Myth: If you have a mental illness, you will never get better.

Fact: People diagnosed with mental illnesses can get better. Because every illness is different, people have different ways of recovering. Most people need help from family and friends, and with the right treatment, can get better and live healthy, happy lives.

If you are in crisis or thinking about hurting yourself or someone else, call The Trevor Project at 1-866-488-7386 or the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-73-TALK (8255).

Myth: I can't help someone with a mental illness. Only a doctor can.

Fact: Only a doctor or mental health professional can diagnose a mental illness, but you can still help. Try talking to people and learn about their talents, skills and interests, in addition to their illness. If you hear something that isn't true, or hear people using hurtful words like "crazy" or "psycho," don't be afraid to speak up and spread the truth about mental health.

Myth: People diagnosed with mental illnesses are dangerous and violent.

Fact: Most people diagnosed with mental illnesses are not violent. In fact, people with mental illnesses are more likely to be the ones that get hurt by others. If you see anyone getting hurt or bullied, find the courage to speak up.

Myth: People who are not straight have a mental illness.

Fact: Being LGBTQ is not a mental illness. People are sexually oriented in many different ways, and those differences are okay. Being lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer or questioning doesn't mean you are unhealthy or sick. Being LGBTQ is not a mental illness or a symptom, but people who are LGBTQ are often at a higher risk for experiencing mental health challenges because of the stigma and discrimination they may face.



WAYS TO DEAL

Everybody has ways of dealing with difficult emotions and situations. While there's no perfect way to cope, some behaviors are healthier and more helpful than others. The coping habits you form as a teen and young adult can have a big impact on how you will handle hard times in the future. Some people turn to risky coping strategies such as drugs or alcohol, self-harm, or risky sexual behavior for many reasons, including:

- attempting to get away from or not feel overwhelming emotions
- gaining a sense of control
- self-punishment
- nonverbally communicating their struggles to others.

Risky strategies may seem easier at times, but they can have added dangers such as increased isolation, shame and addiction that may hurt your ability to function physically and mentally. Healthy coping strategies are safer, can bring more lasting relief and help you think more clearly. Every time you use a healthy option instead of a risky one, you are training your mind to be better prepared to respond to the next challenge. These are some examples of positive ways to cope:

EXPRESS YOURSELF

Finding a healthy way to express your thoughts and emotions can be as simple as talking to a friend or having a good cry, or can take other forms such as music, poetry, cooking, dancing, journaling or art. Find a healthy way to express your emotions that feels comfortable and calming.

FIND SUPPORT

Opening up to someone can be very helpful, whether it's a good friend, family member, or a trusted adult or counselor. You don't need to go through this alone. You can also find support in online communities, local organizations or through a help hotline, such as The Trevor Project (1-866-488-7386).

CHALLENGE NEGATIVE TALK

In life we face negative opinions from other people as well as from ourselves. Negative talk can convince you that you'll fail at something and that you shouldn't even try. It's important to challenge negative talk and find healthy, realistic ways to process your thoughts. Ask yourself if these thoughts are helping you achieve your goals, or if they are controlling you and putting you down. Choosing to focus on a positive, realistic view can help you succeed even when things are stressful.

TAKE CARE OF YOUR BODY

When things are hard, it's easy to forget to take good care of your body. Because the body and mind work together, taking steps to improve your physical health can help your mental health as well. Regular exercise, good meals and eight hours of sleep per night can work wonders for your mood and outlook. It sounds simple, but doing small things for your body can relieve stress, increase your confidence, and help you think more clearly.

GET INVOLVED

Find things that you enjoy doing or activities that help others and get involved. This might mean learning a new skill, joining a club or a sports team, or becoming a volunteer at a community organization. By getting involved you might meet new friends, discover a hidden talent and find that spending time doing something positive helps you focus on something else, at least temporarily. It might also help you calm down, develop a new perspective and think more clearly.

WHERE TO GET HELP

Everybody has the right to feel safe at school, home and work. You do not have to accept violence, threats, harassment, bullying or hateful speech.

These rights are protected by law, so you should not feel bad about sticking up for your right to safety and respect.

No matter what you're going through, it can be helpful to talk to a friend, family member or adult who you trust. If you don't have anybody to talk to, there are online communities and local organizations you can reach out to for help. Asking for help does not mean you are weak; in fact, it's a very brave step.

Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA)
clubs are student-run groups in high schools or middle schools that bring together LGBTQ and straight students to support each other. To find one in your area, visit www.gsanetwork.org.

Or, find a GLSEN (Gay Lesbian and Straight Education Network) chapter at glsen.org/chapters.

— STORY — PATRICK

For most couples, having a child is the mark of a happy beginning. Unfortunately in my case, my parents divorced shortly after I was born. My mother moved to the United States, leaving me behind in Vietnam with my father. My father was an alcoholic who started hurting me when I was very young. As I grew up, my father's anger and rage left deep scars on my body and soul. On my 13th birthday, my dad hurt and humiliated me so badly that I decided to end my life. A friend found me in time and rushed me to the hospital. I was told to never tell anybody about what had happened, because suicide is considered very shameful in Vietnamese culture. The next time my father tried to hit me, I fought back and escaped to the only place I felt safe: my grandmother's house.

Around this time I began to notice that I was attracted to boys instead of girls. I hid this information from my family because being gay wasn't something I could be proud of in my culture. I felt ashamed of this part of myself and kept it a secret.

When I was 15, my mom came back and took me to Pennsylvania to live with her. The day I got on the flight to America, I felt happier than a man winning the lottery. I was so excited to start a new chapter of my life, away from all the horrible things that happened to me in the past. However, when my mother found out that I was gay, she told me that I was a disgrace to her family and asked me to leave. I was devastated. My mom reaffirmed the fear that I dreaded for many years: nobody loves me, not even my own mother. She made me feel like no matter what I did, I would never amount to anything.

"Around this time I began to notice that I was attracted to boys instead of girls."



I moved to California to live with my aunt and focused on the one thing that had always been a comfort to me: school. I didn't deal with my emotions because I was afraid if I let myself think about them, they would break me. But I couldn't bottle my feelings up forever. The stress of daily life combined with the rejection and abuse I'd suffered in the past pushed me into a long period of deep sadness. It was hard to get out of bed in the morning because I felt sad and useless all the time. Yet I refused to get help.

But when I started feeling suicidal again, I knew I had to do something. I couldn't live my life feeling like I was wasting everyone's time. I went to a psychiatrist for help, and learned that I was not the only one who had these sad thoughts and feelings. The emotions I was experiencing were a part of something called depression. I finally realized I couldn't go through this alone, so I started talking to trusted friends about what I was going through, and they listened to me and gave me advice for how to deal with my feelings. I also went on medication for depression and continued to reach out to my support system, and over time, I started feeling better. My recovery from depression helped me realize I shouldn't be ashamed of who I am, both as a gay man and as a person with a mental health challenge. It felt like a huge weight was lifted off my shoulders. After so many years of rejection and shame, I finally learned to accept myself and surround myself with people who love me for who I am. I felt free.

"I finally learned to accept myself and surround myself with people who love me for who I am."

Now I am earning all A's in my classes at UC Davis. I continue to share my story because it's important to share the truth about mental illness. Ignoring my emotions didn't work for me, because what I went through will always be a part of who I am, and those experiences help me be more aware of what others are going through. By working hard and focusing on my recovery and goals, I hope to be "living proof" that people with mental illnesses can contribute to society and help make the world a better place.

"When I started feeling suicidal again, I knew I had to do something."





WHERE TO GET HELP

Remember, the information in this booklet is only the beginning. Deciding to get help is an important and healthy step. You do not need to take this journey alone.

FAMILY, FRIENDS AND TRUSTED ADULTS

Opening up to family and/or friends about what's on your mind can be a healthy and important way to get support. Friends and family can listen to you and remind you that you're not alone, but they can't do it if you don't take the first step and let them know what you're thinking and feeling. Think of someone you trust and find a way to share your thoughts with him/her. If you're having trouble getting up the courage to say something, try writing a note or email or sending a text to let your friend or family member know that you need their support.

It can be helpful to share your struggles with an adult you already feel comfortable around, such as past or present teachers, counselors, ministers, youth leaders or others. A trusted adult can help you find the services you need, give advice, listen and maybe help you prepare for conversations with family or friends.

Unfortunately some family, friends and trusted adults respond negatively instead of offering support. Some LGBTQ teens experience emotional or physical abuse from their friends and family and do not feel safe or supported in their home or at school. If you are facing reactions like this, remember that you are never alone and that help is available to you. You can take the first step to finding support you need by talking to a trained counselor at The Trevor Project (**1-866-488-7386** or thetrevorproject.org). If you feel unable to stay or return home, services like the National Runaway Safeline (**1-800-RUNAWAY**) can help you find the resources and support you need to stay safe.

ORGANIZATIONS

Even if you don't feel comfortable talking to anyone you know, it doesn't mean you are alone. There are organizations staffed with people who want to talk to you and help you get through tough times. Usually all you need to do is reach out, and they will listen to you, offer advice, and give you the chance to get involved and help others.

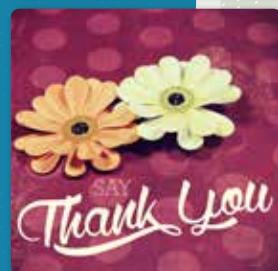
ONLINE COMMUNITIES

If you have access to the internet, you have access to support. No matter what you are going through, there are online communities where you can get information and even chat with people or peers who understand what you're going through.



HOW TO HELP SOMEONE

If you know someone who needs you, these are some simple ways to provide support to help your friend get through tough times.



LISTEN

Let your friend know you are listening by putting away your phone, asking good questions, and focusing on her/him while she/he speaks. Ask them about the emotions they are feeling, and try to avoid giving advice or sharing your own stories unless they actually ask for it. The most important thing is for your friend to know that you're listening and that you care, and the best way to do that is to be present and available.

OPEN YOUR MIND

Try not to judge when a friend shares something personal with you. Even if you don't agree with everything your friend says, try to be as supportive and kind as possible. Being supportive means letting your friend know you understand what they are feeling. It does not mean you have to agree with what they are doing or saying. Saying something like, "I hear how hard this must be for you. I am here for you," is one way of expressing that you care. Avoid using negative names, hurtful phrases or cliché statements and remember that your friend is going through a hard time and might be extra sensitive to criticism right now.

FOLLOW UP

If you know your friend is having trouble, take the time to follow up to see how she/he's doing. If she/he shares something private with you, she/he might be embarrassed and afraid you no longer want to be her/his friend. Reassure your friend that you still care about her/him by checking up on her/him and asking how she/he's doing.

FIND HELP

No matter how good a friend you are, it is very likely that your friend will still need more support. It can be a big help to find and connect your friend with a counselor, doctor or organization. You might even be able to go to her/his first appointment.

Local PFLAG chapters are a great place for LGBTQ people as well as their parents, family and friends to get support and educational materials. Visit www.pflag.org to learn more.

SPEAK UP

Say something if you see or hear someone being bullied, hurt or mistreated. One person can make a big difference in someone's life. By taking a stand, you can help stop the spread of stigma and give someone hope.

TAKE ACTION IN CRISIS

If you are afraid your friend is going to hurt him or herself or someone else, you need to take action and get help right away. You can call 911 and stay with your friend until help arrives, or call a help hotline such as the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at **1-800-273-8255**. You can also visit suicideispreventable.org to locate services and get more information to help you know the signs of suicide and find the right words to help someone in crisis.



— STORY — MY TRUE SELF

“Uriel, be your raw self.”

The words echo in my head as my alarm clock goes berserk and yanks me out of my bizarre dream. I immediately pour everything I can remember into the curled up pages of my dream journal, thinking that I shouldn’t have read *Psychic Intelligence* before going to bed. In my dream, I was struggling to answer a college interviewer’s question, “How do you get raw rose petals?” The interviewer, perhaps out of pity for my floundering, answered: “Be your raw self.” As a repressed homosexual, I knew that being “raw” translated to acceptance of that aspect of myself, from me as well as others.

For many years, I was ashamed of who I was. I recall being deathly afraid of rejection, but what frightened me the most was my own rejection of my true self. I often felt trapped and isolated, which not surprisingly led me to a classic outlet of coping: journaling. Within the nonjudgmental pages of my journal, I would let loose all my fears and pain of rejection. In the early days, the pages read, “I’m scared of ridicule. I’m scared of what my friends and family will think of me. I am scared to be me. Why do I put myself through this?” With each successive entry, I brought myself to a slightly more liberated state of mind.

I wrote for two consecutive years before I had that dream, which unlocked the answer to my dilemma of identity. But it would take another year before I mustered up the courage to take action, a year of gradually accepting myself and familiarizing the old me with the new me. After I came out to my family and friends, my journal finally got to show a lighter side: “No longer am I split between artificial and authentic. I am THE most authentic version of myself today and I could not be happier.” Now, I know not to hide the real person behind an artificial persona.

Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote, “To be yourself in a world that is constantly trying to make you something else is the greatest accomplishment.” I could not agree more, I feel that I have let my innermost self out, and I have never felt so accomplished in my life. After this, I know that I can overcome any other obstacle that comes my way, whether it is internal or external. Today I am happy with who I am, for I am my raw self.



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