



headspace

National Youth Mental Health Foundation

Street 47-51 Chetwynd Street North Melbourne

Mail PO Box 473 North Melbourne VIC 3051

Tel +61 3 9027 0100 Fax +61 3 9027 0199

headspace.org.au

Position paper - young people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex

July 2011

headspace position papers are for general information only. They are not intended to be and should not be relied on as a substitute for specific medical or health advice. They are not intended to be and should not be relied on as clinical guidelines. While every effort is taken to ensure the information is accurate, **headspace** makes no representations and gives no warranties that this information is correct, current, complete, reliable or suitable for any purpose. We disclaim all responsibility and liability for any direct or indirect loss, damage, cost or expense whatsoever in the use of or reliance upon this information.

Young people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex (LGBTI)

the issue

headspace recognises there is entrenched prejudice and discrimination against members of many minority groups within Australian society (and consequent marginalisation). Such discrimination creates vulnerabilities that seriously affect the health and wellbeing of those who are judged on the basis of their gender, ethnicity, health status, religion, sexuality or gender identity. **headspace** is determined to provide a safe place for young people who are directly affected by these behaviours through the celebration of diversity and raising awareness of the negative effects of culturally entrenched attitudes.

evidence

A survey of 1749 same sex attracted young Australians in 2004 found that many young people experienced homophobia, manifest through verbal abuse (44%) and unfair treatment on the basis of sexuality (38%) [1]. The most common site for the experience of abuse was within the school environment (78%). Those from rural backgrounds reported feeling less safe at social occasions than those living in cities. Homophobia has a significant impact on young people's health and wellbeing, with an increased likelihood of self-harm and suicidal behaviour.

ABS statistics indicate that people who identify themselves as being homosexual/bisexual were more than twice as likely to have experienced a mental disorder in the previous 12 months [2].

Depression and anxiety rates amongst lesbian and bisexual women are at least twice those of heterosexual women [3].

position statements

- **headspace** uses the term LGBTI to include young people who same sex attracted or gender questioning through being lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or intersex— in response to advice from its Youth Reference Group.
- Young people who are LGBTI are at higher risk of experiencing mental health concerns due to the difficulties associated with disclosure and community attitudes, and not due to their sexual or gender identity.
- The ages between 12 and 25 years are a critical period for the development of identity, and uncertainty and questioning regarding gender identity and sexual preference are common.
- Young people who are LGBTI face particular pressures in their relationships with family, peers and schools, which can lead to vulnerability to depression, homelessness and drug use in response to lack of acceptance and bullying.
- Respect and acknowledgment of sexual orientation and gender identity is fundamental to understanding a young person's experience and needs.
- It is important to positively represent and support all young people; therefore, representations of young people should not imply that everyone is heterosexual.
- Initiatives that challenge homophobia and promote a safe environment for all Australians are crucial, particularly within the school environment.

headspace recommends

- Acceptance of sexual orientation and gender diversity is widely promoted as important for mental health and wellbeing.
- Young people and the wider community are educated to ensure that the particular needs and issues facing young people who are LGBTI are recognised and discriminatory beliefs are addressed.
- All services for young people actively consider and address sexual orientation and gender identity issues in service planning, policy development and delivery.
- Staff employed in services for young people are educated regarding the issues faced by young people who are LGBTI and are sensitive to their needs.

- Recognition of the experiences of young people who are LGBTI at school and in the workplace, and actions prioritised to eliminate bullying and discrimination.

headspace will

provide services that are welcoming to young people who are LGBTI and responsive to their needs.

references

1. Hillier, L., Turner, A., & Mitchell, A., *Writing themselves in again - six years on: the second national report on the sexuality, health and well-being of same sex attracted young people*. 2005, Australian Research Centre in Sex, Health and Society, Latrobe University: Melbourne.
2. Australian Bureau of Statistics, *National survey of mental health and wellbeing: Summary of results*. 2007, ABS: Canberra.
3. McNair, R., *Lesbian health inequalities: a cultural minority issue for health professionals*. Medical Journal of Australia, 2003. **178**(12): p. 643-645.