Issues of sexuality and gender identity do not cause mental health problems. However, social factors associated with identifying as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgendered or Intersex (LGBTI) can have a negative impact on mental health.

**Sexuality, gender identity and mental health**

LGBTI young people experience high rates of victimisation and abuse, and they are more likely to experience depressive symptoms than heterosexual young people. They are at increased risk of harming themselves: in Australia, more than one in three LGBTI young people reported that they had thought about harming themselves, or had actually done so, in response to homophobic experiences.

Not all LGBTI people face the same challenges in their lives, but some common negative experiences have been reported:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Feeling 'different' from other people</th>
<th>Having difficulty fitting in and coping at school</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Feeling pressure to deny or change their sexuality</td>
<td>Experiencing bullying, including verbal and physical abuse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feeling worried about ‘coming out’ to friends and family members and the possibility of being rejected or ridiculed</td>
<td>Feeling unsupported or misunderstood by family or friends</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Having difficulty fitting in and coping at school</td>
<td>Being discriminated against in the workplace</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Such pressures can be stressful and overwhelming, especially when combined with the usual challenges faced by young people such as managing school or university, finding a job, forming relationships and making sense of their identity and their place in the world.

**Mental health**

 Discrimination, abuse and marginalisation resulting from sexuality or gender identity can make it difficult to fully enjoy life and to maintain a sense of mental health and wellbeing. It can also make it hard to seek help when problems arise, and to know where to turn for help and support.

**Why do mental health problems develop?**

Mental health problems occur for many reasons, and can seldom be linked to a single cause. Contributing factors include:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Biological factors – including a person’s genes</th>
<th>Social factors – including stress arising from school, work, relationships or money, or negative life events</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Negative experiences in early life – for example abuse, neglect, or loss of a parent or loved one</td>
<td>Individual factors – such as self-esteem or personality</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**When does mental health become a problem?**

Changes that might indicate problems with mental health include the following:

| Changes in behaviour – such as being more or less talkative, or more aggressive | Changes in appetite and sleep patterns – sleeping or eating more or less than usual, or rapidly losing or gaining weight |
| Changes in mood – such as feeling sadder or more anxious than usual | Changes in coping – such as feeling overwhelmed and tired of life |
| Changes in relationships – for example falling out with friends or partners, or conflict with family members | |
It’s normal to experience some of these changes from time to time. However, if you notice changes in a young person that are lasting longer than usual, affecting most areas of life, or are preventing them from doing things they usually enjoy, then they may be developing a mental health problem. Getting help early can reduce the impact of the problem on their life, and decrease the chances of having more serious problems in the future.

If a young person says they are thinking of suicide or harming themselves, or if you or anyone else is worried about their safety, then it’s vital to seek immediate help. Contact your local mental health service, Crisis Assessment and Treatment Team or hospital emergency department, and develop a plan with the young person for keeping them safe until they can be seen by a mental health worker.

**Getting help**

Young people are often reluctant to seek help. It can feel even harder for LGBTI young people if they have had past experiences of discrimination from health professionals, have concerns about confidentiality, or are reluctant to discuss their sexuality or gender identity. It will be important to find someone they trust and feel comfortable with.

Many GPs and other health professionals are knowledgeable and experienced in working with LGBTI young people. If they’ve had a positive experience with a GP or counsellor in the past, it might be helpful to encourage them to contact that person again. You can also support them in contacting their local community health centre or **headspace** centre.

**What you can do**

Workers can be important supports for LGBTI young people:

- Make sure your workplace is engaging for LGBTI young people. Have appropriate materials and resources available, and avoid assumptions about sexuality
- Find out about other services in your area that cater specifically to the needs of LGBTI young people, including health care providers
- Social supports and community connectedness can help protect mental health in LGBTI young people, so facilitate these wherever possible
- Be transparent about confidentiality policies, including the limits of confidentiality
- Allow young people to talk about their sexuality when they feel comfortable doing so

For more information you can visit **headspace.org.au** or Rainbow Network at rainbownetwork.net.au

**Acknowledgments:**

*Writing Themselves in 3: The third national study on the sexual health and wellbeing of same sex attracted and gender questioning young people.* Australian Research Centre in Sex, Health and Society, La Trobe University, 2010.

*Feeling Queer and Blue: A review of the literature on depression and related issues among gay, lesbian, bisexual and other homosexually active people.* Australian Research Centre in Sex, Health and Society, La Trobe University, 2008.