Family and friends

Sexuality and mental health

Sexuality and mental health

The term sexuality refers to a person's sexual attractions, experiences of the attraction and sexual preferences. Some sexualities include homosexual (attracted to the same sex), heterosexual (attracted to the opposite sex), and bisexual (attracted to more than one sex). A young person close to you may identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual, straight, pansexual, queer, asexual, or something else or they may not yet be sure of their sexuality.

If a young person lets you know that they identify with a diverse sexuality you are being trusted with very private and personal information. They may have never talked to anyone about this before, or they may have only just begun to understand



and feel comfortable with their sexuality. They trust that you will support and accept them.

If a young person has confided in you, take the time to ask them how you can support them. Reassure them that you will respect their privacy and ask their permission before sharing their information with anyone else. They may not be comfortable to let other people know about their sexuality as yet, and it is very important that the young person remains in control of their personal information.

Common experiences

There are a range of stressful experiences that may increase the risk of depression, anxiety, self harm and suicide for same sex attracted (SSA) young people. Some common experiences that can affect the wellbeing of a young person can include:

ନ୍<mark>ଧ headspace</mark>

- · Feeling "different" from other people around them
- Homophobic bullying, whether verbal or physical
- Feeling pressure to deny or change their sexuality
- Feeling worried about "coming out" to friends, family, fellow students or workers, along with the possibility of being rejected or isolated
- Feeling unsupported or misunderstood by friends, family, fellow students or workers.



These pressures can be very stressful, especially when combined with all the other issues associated with growing up, such as managing school or university, finding a job, forming relationships and making sense of their identity and place in the world.

What are the early signs suggesting a possible mental health problem?

Things to look out for in the young person include:



Changes in mood – feeling sadder, more anxious, or more irritable than usual



Changes in sleep patterns – not sleeping enough, or sleeping too much



Changes in behaviour – being less talkative, becoming withdrawn or being more aggressive



Changes in coping – feeling overwhelmed or tired of life

ttt

Changes in relationships – falling out with friends or their partner, or conflict with family



Changes in thinking – more negative thoughts, or thoughts of self harm or suicide Changes in appetite – eating more or less than usual, or losing or gaining weight rapidly



It's normal to experience some of these changes from time to time. When these changes last longer than expected and begin to interfere with a young person's life, their study, work and friendships, talk to them about seeking help. A good place to start is their general practitioner (GP), their local **headspace** centre or **eheadspace** (online or by phone).



headspace National Youth Mental Health Foundation is funded by the Australian Government Department of Health under the Youth Mental Health Initiative.

Sexuality and mental health



Families can have a major impact on the wellbeing of SSA young people. Young people that experience conflict with, or rejection by, their families and loved ones are at higher risk of developing depression and anxiety. They are also more at risk of homelessness, economic instability, self harm and suicide¹, substance abuse and sexually transmitted infections². SSA young people who come from families that fully support their sexuality have better overall health, mental health, higher self-esteem, and are more likely to believe they will have a good life as an adult². The research also shows that small amounts of change from families can reduce risk - so being slightly less rejecting and slightly more supportive can make a difference to the young person's risk for suicide, general and mental health, and substance use concerns².

How to support a young person with a diverse sexuality

- Talk in an open, non-judgemental way about their sexuality.
- Express acceptance and provide support.
- Require that family members and other people respect their sexuality.
- Welcome their friends or partner to family events.
- Believe they can have a full, happy future as an adult.
- Remember that small changes in your level of acceptance and support can make a difference in reducing their risk of suicide and improve general and mental health outcomes.
- Encourage them to get further advice and support at **headspace** or **eheadspace** if they are going through a tough time.



Don't forget to look after your own needs too and reach out for extra support if you or other family members need it. Talk to someone you trust, and seek professional help.

Notional Youth Mental Health Foundation

For more information, to find your nearest headspace centre or for online and telephone support, visit headspace.org.au

This information was produced in conjunction with Rainbow Network (www.rainbownetwork.com.au)

References: ¹Robinson, K. H., Bansel, P., Denson, N., Ovenden, G. & Davies, C. (2014). Growing Up Queer: Issues Facing Young Australians Who Are Gender Variant and Sexuality Diverse, Young and Well Cooperative Research Centre, Melbourne. ²Ryan, C., Huebner, D., Diaz, R. M., & Sanchez, J. (2009). Family rejection as a predictor of negative health outcomes in white and Latino lesbian, gay and bisexual young adults. Pediatrics, 123(1): 346-352.

Fact sheets 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. 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.