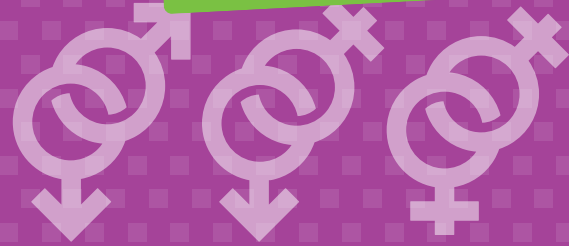


# Sexuality and mental health



## 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.



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

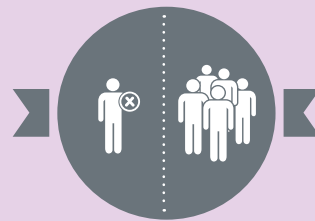
If a young person has confided in you, take the time to ask them how you can support them. Reassure them that you will respect their privacy and ask their permission before sharing their information with anyone else. They may not be comfortable to let other people know about their sexuality as yet, and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

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

## Common experiences

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

- **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 behaviour** – being less talkative, becoming withdrawn or being more aggressive



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



**Changes in appetite** – eating more or less than usual, or losing or gaining weight rapidly



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



**Changes in coping** – feeling overwhelmed or tired of life



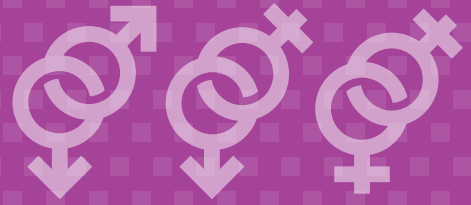
**Changes in thinking** – more negative thoughts, or thoughts of self harm or suicide



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).



# Sexuality and mental health



## The role of family and friends

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 suicide<sup>1</sup>, substance abuse and sexually transmitted infections<sup>2</sup>.



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 adult<sup>2</sup>. 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 concerns<sup>2</sup>.

## 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.



## Remember

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.