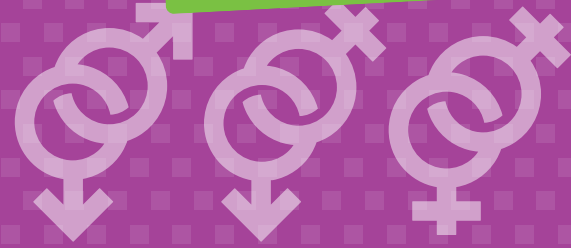


# Sexuality and mental health



## 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 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. The young person should remain in control of their "coming out" process.



## 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:



**Feeling "different"** from other people around them



**Homophobic bullying**, whether verbal or physical



**Feeling pressure** to deny or change their sexuality

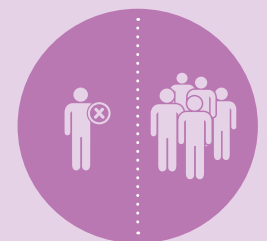


**Feeling worried** about "coming out" to friends, family, fellow students or workers, along with the possibility of being rejected or isolated

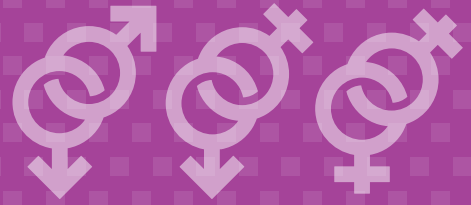


**Feeling unsupported** or misunderstood by friends, family, fellow students or workers.

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.



# Sexuality and mental health



## 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).



## How to support a young person with a diverse sexuality

- Talk in an open, non-judgemental way.
- Express acceptance and provide support.
- Address their identity only when it is related to their concerns and your relationship with them, or if they bring it up themselves.
- Work to reduce the effects of homophobic abuse or bullying by attempting to tackle the problem and telling them that homophobia is a problem with society, not them.
- Ask how the young person's family has reacted to their sexuality. Family support can have a big impact on the young person's health and wellbeing.
- Reaffirm the importance of supportive friends and family, as well as others in the SSA community, to encourage the young person to experience a positive sense of their identity.
- Identify community and online resources for SSA young people and their families. This can help give access to positive role models for both the young person and their families.
- Encourage them to get further advice and support at **headspace** or **eheadspace** if they are going through a tough time.

