

SIEC Alert #53, December 2003

Suicide Among Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual or Transgendered Youth

Sexual Orientation Affects Suicide Risk

Gay, lesbian, and bisexual (GLB) youth are at increased risk for suicide.

Suicidal Ideation

D'Augelli and colleagues (2001) found that:

- 42% of GLB youth studied had thoughts of suicide at some time
- 25% had thoughts of suicide in the past year
- 48% said thoughts of suicide were clearly or to some degree related to their sexual orientation

Suicide Attempts

- 54% of suicide attempts occurred before parents knew of the youths' sexual orientation
- Youth who were gay, lesbian, bisexual or unsure of their sexual orientation were 3.4 times more likely to report a suicide attempt in the previous 12-month period (Garofalo et al., 1999).

Limitations exist in data collection, particularly in early study of this phenomenon, including a reliance on self-reporting of sexual orientation and suicidal behaviour, along with difficulty in defining terms (McDaniel et al., 2001; Savin-Williams, 2001). Additionally, the prevalence of suicidality among transgendered youth is unknown, as this population is often not included in the study of suicide and sexual orientation. These limitations may lead to underestimating the problem (Bagley and Tremblay, 2000).

Suicide Risk Factors for Gay and Lesbian Youth

- Previous suicide attempts
- Suicidal behaviour among friends or peers
- Psychiatric disorder, eg., depression, anxiety (Leslie et al., 2000; McDaniel et al., 2001).
- Substance abuse
- Family dysfunction, eg., parental alcoholism, physical abuse, divorce
- Identity conflict or identity confusion
- Interrupted social ties or lack of personal support networks, including rejection by family
- Social inequity, eg., limited social and legal protection, hostile school or work environments, physical and verbal victimization, (Mcbee and Rogers, 1997), harassment and persecution (Bagley and Tremblay, 2000)

Protective Factors

It is important to note that not all gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender or questioning youth will be suicidal. Strong support systems and efforts to help GLBT youth maintain confidence, mastery and self-esteem help to offset risks identified above. More research is needed to identify additional protective factors.

Supporting GLBT Youth in Schools:

- Develop and enforce school policy to support and protect GLBT youth from verbal and physical harassment (Morrison & L'Heureux, 2001).
- Educate school staff on issues related to sexuality
- Provide appropriate referrals for GLBT youth with mental health problems
- Develop support groups for GLBT youth (Warwick, et al., 2000).

Family and Friends:

Information, education and support are vital. This can come from self-study and/or from other parents of GLBT youth (Warwick et al., 2000). Web-based resources to help you begin are on the back of this SIEC Alert.

Can Heterosexual Counsellors Provide Effective Service for GLBT Youth?

Service providers who are informed, caring, supportive and aware of their limitations can be effective counsellors of GLBT youth. What can you do?

- Contextualize your work
- Own your limitations
- Educate yourself – about sexuality, adolescent development, issues and risks facing this population
- Examine your own biases
- Familiarize yourself with current language and terminology
- Do not label or pathologize; be careful not to overtreat or undertreat
- Be aware of diversity – do not assume all GLBT people are the same
- Learn about gay culture, community, and resources
- Pay attention to issues of confidentiality
- Do not use a heterosexual paradigm and assume it will fit

Source: Breaking Barriers Through Education: Anti-homophobia workshop train the trainer manual for youth service providers. Rainbow Resource Centre, 2001

Pamphlets specific to the needs of GLBT clients in a waiting room can help to create an atmosphere that is open and caring in serving this population.

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Centre for Suicide Prevention

Suicide Among Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual or Transgendered Youth



DEFINITIONS:

- Gay: A term that was once associated with either homosexual males or females, but which is becoming more and more specifically associated with male homosexuals.
- Lesbian: A female homosexual.
- Bisexual: Someone who is attracted physically and emotionally to people regardless of gender.
- Transgendered: An umbrella term that includes transsexuals, crossdressers, drag queens and drag kings, gender out laws, and all those whose gender roles are ambiguous. This identification challenges traditional notions of sexuality and gender. Transgendered people may be heterosexual, bisexual, or homosexual.

Source: *Breaking Barriers Through Education: Anti-Homophobia Workshop*. Produced by Rainbow Resource Centre, Winnipeg, Manitoba January 2001.

SIEC Resources*

SIEC #010011

Bagley, C. & Tremblay, P. (2000). Elevated rates of suicidal behavior in gay, lesbian, and bisexual youth. *Crisis*, 21(3), 111-117.

SIEC #020491

Burden Leslie, M., Stein, J. A., & Rotheram-Borus, M. J. (2002). Sex-specific predictors of suicidality among runaway youth. *Journal of Clinical Child and Adolescent Psychology*, 31(1), 27-40.

SIEC #020308

D'Augelli, A. R., Hershberger, S. L., & Pilkington, N. W. (2001). Suicidality patterns and sexual orientation-related factors among lesbian, gay, and bisexual youths. *Suicide and Life-Threatening Behavior*, 31(3), 250-264.

SIEC #010923

Garofalo, R., Wolf, C., Wissow, L. S., Woods, E. R., & Goodman, E. (1999). Sexual orientation and risk of suicide attempt among a representative sample of youth. *Archives of Pediatric Adolescent Medicine*, 153, 487-493.

SIEC #000206

McBee, S. M. & Rogers, J. R. (1997). Identifying risk factors for gay and lesbian suicidal behavior: Implications for mental health counselors. *Journal of Mental Health Counseling*, 19, 143-155.

SIEC #010840

MacDaniel, J. S., Purcell, D., D'Augelli, A. R. (2001). The relationship between sexual orientation and risk for suicide: Research findings and future directions for research and prevention. *Suicide and Life-Threatening Behavior*, 31(Suppl. 1), 84-105.

SIEC #010857

Morrison, L. L. & L'Heureux, J. (2001). Suicide and gay/lesbian/bisexual youth: Implications for clinicians. *Journal of Adolescence*, 24, 39-49.

SIEC #020616

Savin-Williams, R. C. (2001). Suicide attempts among sexual-minority youths: Population and measurement issues. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, 69(6), 983-991.

SIEC #031026

Warwick, I., Oliver, C., & Aggleton, P. (2000). Sexuality and mental health promotion: Lesbian and gay young people. In P. Aggleton, J. Hurry, & I. Warwick (Eds.), *Young People and Mental Health* (pp. 133-146). Toronto: John Wiley & Sons.

Additional Resources

Davis, J. & Huen, D. (2000). *Breaking Barriers Through Education: Anti-Homophobia Workshop Train the Trainer Manual for Youth Service Providers*. Winnipeg: Rainbow Resource Centre.

PFLAG Canada: <http://www.pflag.ca/>

PFLAG U.S.A.: <http://www.pflag.org/>

Gay, Lesbian, Straight Education Network:
<http://www.glsen.org/templates/about/index.html>

Canadian Health Network:
<http://www.canadian-health-network.ca>

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