

Fact Sheet:

Social Pressures that affect Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) people

Homophobia and Transphobia

Homophobia is the unreasoning fear and hatred of homosexuals, anti-homosexual beliefs and prejudices. The term transphobia represents a similar unreasoning fear, hatred and prejudice against transgender people. These attitudes are influenced by social, cultural and religious beliefs that reinforce negative attitudes towards homosexuality and transgender people and affect can people's behaviour towards lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) people.

The Queensland *Anti-Discrimination* legislation protects LGBT people from being discriminated against or vilified publicly on the basis of sexuality or gender identity. However LGBT people still experience social isolation, stigma, rejection, verbal abuse, harassment, threats and acts of violence as a result of homophobia and transphobia. The 2005 study *Mapping Homophobia in Australia*, reported that approximately 38% of Queenslanders considered homosexuality immoral, making QLD one of the most homophobic states in Australia. The impact of living with the threat or the experiences of such high levels of discrimination is often wrongly negated by the misconception that being attracted to the same sex or transgender is a choice for LGBT people.

Heterosexism

Heterosexism is the belief that all people are or should be heterosexual, that other types of sexuality are wrong and that everyone's gender identity is fixed by their sex at birth. Such attitudes are often communicated without people realising, through assumptions rather than overt acts of discrimination like homophobia. Although heterosexism does not directly express negative attitudes or beliefs about sexuality or gender identity, the lack of recognition of LGBT people, sexuality and gender identity issues still implies that LGBT people are not socially acceptable within our community.

Heterosexism can affect LGBT people by:

- Making LGBT identities, sexuality and gender identity issues invisible or non-existent
- Reinforces feelings of guilt, difference, not being 'normal' (internal homophobia or transphobia)
- Increases expectations of negative reactions or lack of understanding about sexuality or gender identity issues
- Increases the fear of rejection by family, friends or service providers

The Process of Coming Out

Coming out is a process of integrating a person's sexuality or gender identity into their social and personal life. It is a crucial element of an LGBT person's self-acceptance and general health and wellbeing.

The initial coming out process involves:

- A growing awareness and self-acceptance of an individual's own sexuality or gender identity
- Developing social ties with other LGBT people
- Developing positive attitudes or awareness of sexuality or gender identity
- Self-disclosure to others and being comfortable with people knowing this information.

Coming out, especially the initial stages of this process can cause stress, trauma or anxiety. This is often influenced by the fear or experience of being rejected or socially isolated due to the stigma attached to sexuality and gender identity, experiencing discrimination, harassment and even violence on the basis of an individual's sexuality or gender identity. However coming out is not considered to be a specific stage or event in an LGBT persons life but rather a life long process. When an LGBT person enters a new social environment such as starting a new job, moving towns or joining new social groups, the decision whether to disclose sexuality or gender identity status is often something that must be considered, taking into account the consequences of this disclosure.

¹Flood M, Hamilton C, Mapping Homophobia in Australia, The Australia Institute Ltd, website, http://www.tai.org.au/Publications_Files/Papers&Sub_Files/Homophobia%20webpaper%20Final.pdf

For transgender people the process of coming out is often not a choice they have the ability to control. Some transgender people may be easily identified by general members of the public, without actively disclosing this information to people. This has been noted to increase levels of stress and anxiety encountered by transgender people when they are transitioning to their correct gender identity and generally living as a transgender person.

Internal Homophobia and Transphobia

The process of coming out may be made more difficult by feelings of internal homophobia or/and transphobia. Both terms refer to the negative attitudes and feelings towards either, homosexuality and transgenderism respectively. These attitudes are generally formed before people realise they identify as an LGBT person, and are influenced by social values and beliefs that reinforce negative attitudes about homosexuality and transgender people. Internal homophobia and transphobia can affect the mental health of LGBT people, their ability to accept their own sexuality or gender identity and make the process of coming out more difficult.

Internal homophobia or transphobia can affect LGBT people by:

- Increasing levels of depression, anxiety and psychological distress
- Increasing low self-esteem
- Decreasing the likelihood of disclosing sexuality or gender identity issues to others
- Reducing the connection with the LGBT community or other LGBT people.

Transitioning from heterosexual to same sex relationships and transgender identities

The acceptance of an LGBT person's own sexuality or gender identity often involves a transitioning period. Some LGBT people will have been in heterosexual relationships, been identified as heterosexuals or always perceived as a man or woman rather than the gender that they identify with. Transitioning into an LGBT identity and life involves confronting issues of personal identity. During this period many LGBT people experience a sense of conflict and confusion relating to sexuality or gender identity issues. High levels of stress and depression are often experienced throughout this process of change. This is often increased if individuals do not have adequate support, are not able to disclose these feelings to other people or relate to other members of the LGBT community.

However other Factors can add to the stress of transitioning, such as;

- Loss of relationships
- Rejection by family, friends and work colleagues
- Residency/Custody battles for children
- A major change in living arrangements, may include geographical relocation
- Coming to terms with a shift in an individual's personal identity

Disclosing sexuality or gender identity status

Being Outed in the community

Some LGBT people find it difficult to address or disclose sexuality or gender identity issues due to the fear of being outed in the wider community. Being outed involves other people disclosing an individual's sexuality or gender identity without the individual's consent or knowledge. The fear of being outed is influenced by concerns relating to how people will react to this information, the fear of stigma, social isolation and the lack of acceptance of an individual's sexuality or gender identity. Being outed can force LGBT people to confront these issues before they have accepted their own sexuality or gender identity, before they are ready to discuss these issues with other people or before they are prepared to deal with the lack of social acceptance and understanding from the wider community.

The fear of having other people find out about a person's sexuality or gender identity can affect how LGBT people interact with family, friends, work colleagues and access services.

In this context confidentiality and trust are often crucial in assisting LGBT people disclose this information, especially by those working within health or health-related services.

Factors that make disclosing sexuality and gender identity issues difficult include:

- Fear or experience of being rejected or stigmatised because of their sexuality or gender identity
- The lack of understanding and acceptance of sexuality and/or gender identity issues
- Internal homophobia or transphobia: personal levels of comfort and acceptance
- Not being out to many people or anyone at all
- Fear or experience of being discriminated, harassed or threatened on the basis of their sexuality or gender identity
- Levels of social and/or institutional homophobia or transphobia in the community

Many issues relating to the fear of disclosure of sexuality and gender identity issues are similar to the concerns people living with HIV/AIDS have about disclosing their HIV status.

Not Disclosing Sexuality or Gender Identity Status

Not disclosing sexuality or gender identity issues can lead to mental health concerns for LGBT people such as high levels of depression, social isolation, anxiety and distress related to the fear of being outed and not being able to express or accept one's own identity. People who generally do not disclose their sexuality or gender identity to other people are often referred to as being 'closeted'. However disclosure may take place at different levels. A person may disclose their sexuality or gender identity to trusted friends but not to work colleagues and family. While non-disclosure can have a negative impact upon the health and wellbeing of LGBT people it may not always be a positive or safe step to disclose this information in all environments. Such disclosure may need to be considered in relation to the reactions an LGBT person may have to deal with from other people and if the individual is capable of dealing with the consequences of this disclosure.

Social Isolation

One of the greatest concerns for LGBT people is the experience of social isolation. Social isolation may affect LGBT people due to a variety of personal and environmental reasons;

- The inability to live openly as an LGBT person in their community
- The inability to disclose sexuality or gender identity to family, friends and support services
- Not knowing any other LGBT people in their community
- Geographical relocation due to levels of homophobia or transphobia experienced or expected from the community

The lack of social support and acceptance of LGBT people can affect their ability to come out, to disclose issues relating to their sexuality or gender identity to support services and other peers and their ability to lead open and fulfilled lives. Accessing support from people who understand or are accepting of sexuality or gender identity issues is a vital component to the overall health and wellbeing of LGBT people in the community.