

BETTER

OUT

THAN IN

SUPPORTING THE MENTAL HEALTH
OF LGBTI+ YOUNG PEOPLE

Supporting Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual &
Trans Young People in Ireland



JIGSAW
Young people's
health in mind

LGBTI+ TERMINOLOGY

People tend to use the terms sex and gender interchangeably. Often, when a sex is assigned at birth, a gender is assumed.

However, a person's gender identity does not always match the sex assigned at birth. Many people feel overwhelmed about the language and terminology associated with LGBTI+ issues – even the acronym itself causes confusion. So what do some of the more common terms mean?

Sexual orientation: This is a term used to describe someone's emotional, romantic and sexual attraction to other people.

LGBTI+: Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Intersex people. The plus sign includes people with other minority sexual orientations and gender identities.

Lesbian: A woman who is primarily attracted to other women.

Gay: Someone who is attracted to people of the same gender. Gay usually refers to men, as many women prefer to call themselves lesbian.

Bisexual: Someone who is attracted to more than one gender e.g. both men and women.

Heterosexual: Someone who is attracted to people of the opposite gender.

Asexual: Someone who is not sexually attracted to others or who has no (or low) interest in having sexual experiences.

Pansexual: An individual who may be attracted to any person, regardless of their sex or gender identity.

Queer: Some people use this term as an alternative to LGBTI+. This term isn't embraced by all LGBTI+ people, so best use it about yourself rather than others.

Coming out: The process of understanding yourself and telling others about your sexual orientation or gender identity.

Gender identity: A person's deeply felt internal identity as female, male, or another identity such as non-binary.

Gender expression: How people show their gender through clothes, hair, voice and so on.

Transgender or trans: An umbrella term for those whose gender identity and/or gender expression differs from the sex they were given at birth.

Transition: A process in which trans people begin to live as the gender with which they identify, rather than the sex they were given at birth.

Non-binary: Individuals who do not have an exclusively male or female gender identity.

Gender fluid: Someone who does not have a constant or fixed gender identity.

Androgynous: This can describe someone who has a gender expression that is both masculine and feminine.

Intersex: This is an umbrella term used to describe a wide range of natural bodily variations that do not fit typical binary notions of male and female bodies. In some cases, intersex traits are visible at birth while in others, they are not apparent until puberty or later in life. Some intersex variations may not be physically apparent at all.

WHAT IS MENTAL HEALTH & WELLBEING?

Just as we all have physical health, we all have mental health.

Often, when people think of mental health, negative images, thoughts or stereotypes come to mind. We can think of people experiencing severe mental health difficulties. However, mental health is about a lot more than just the negative issues that you so often see or hear about.

A useful way of thinking about your mental health is to see it as a scale or a spectrum. It ranges from good mental health and wellbeing on one end to poor mental health on the other.

We are all somewhere along this spectrum of good mental health to poor mental health.

Mental health is about:

- Feeling good about yourself, but also not taking yourself too seriously and being able to laugh at yourself.
- Being able to live and study and play. For young people this often means being able to go to school/college and to learn.
- Experiencing disappointments and learning that they are part of life; that you don't always get your own way. This can be a tough lesson, especially for young people.
- Being able to form and maintain relationships with others. This is especially important for teenagers, as this is a time of life when friends assume great importance; they become almost like a second family.
- Belonging and fitting in. This takes on great importance for young people as they figure out their sense of who they are and where they fit in the world – this is important for mental health as it helps us to feel less alone.

- Facing problems, challenges and rejection, and developing coping skills to get through the tough times so that they don't completely overwhelm you.

Many young LGBTI+ people live happy and fulfilling lives, where they are accepted for who they are. However, the journey to get there can be difficult at times.

Growing up LGBTI+ can be challenging particularly when someone is hiding their sexual or gender identity. Discovering and beginning to accept that identity is often associated with a sense of isolation, fear of rejection and possible confusion.

Despite recent advances for LGBTI+ young people such as marriage equality, the LGBTI+ community still face difficulties in their everyday lives. Feelings of anxiety, depression and loneliness are everyday realities for many LGBTI+ young people.

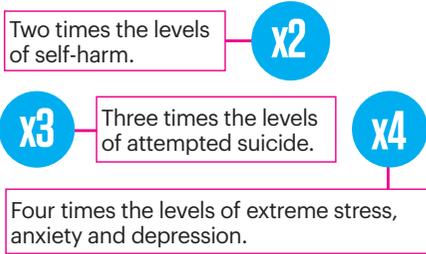
(Denholm, 2006)

LGBTI+ MENTAL HEALTH

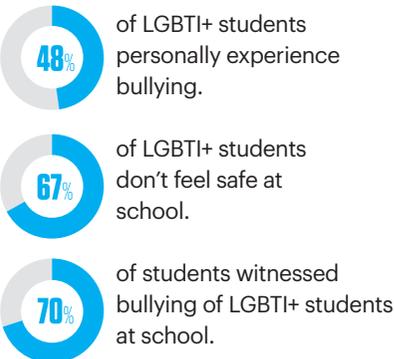
Suicide and self-harm

Some LGBTI+ young people face bullying, fear of rejection, isolation, and prejudice in Irish society. This can mean that they are more vulnerable to developing mental health difficulties.

Research has shown that LGBTI+ young people in Ireland experience...



LGBTI+ bullying...



Compared to those who have not experienced LGBTI+ bullying in school, those who have are:



According to recent research, LGBTI+ young people find seeking help around mental health challenging for a number of reasons in addition to stigma:

56% of LGBTI+ youth

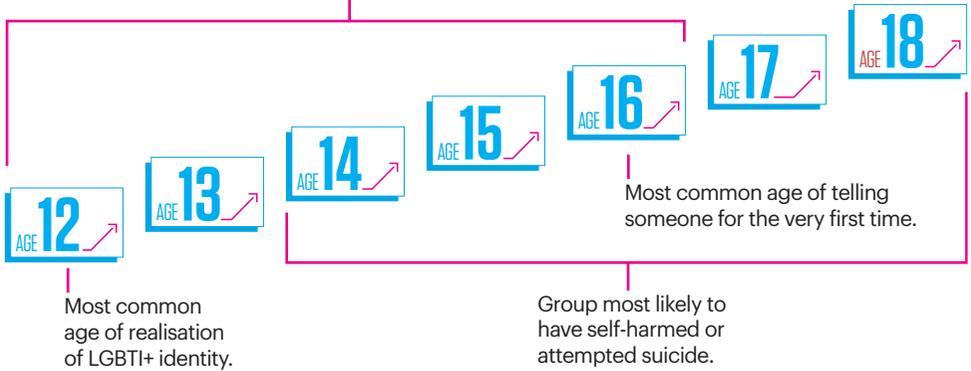
choose not to worry their parents or friends about mental health issues, feeling pressure to appear content once they have come out as LGBTI+.

49% of LGBTI+ youth

surveyed feel reluctant to open up about their mental health due to the perceived expectations that they should feel happy in a post-marriage-referendum Ireland.

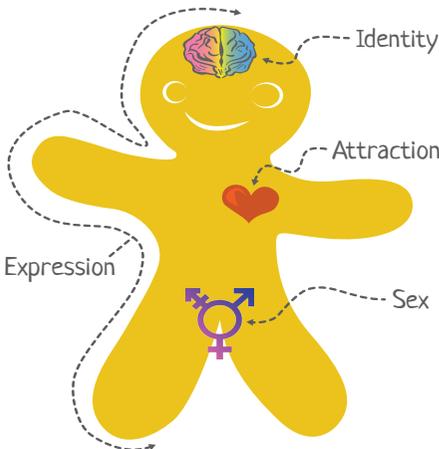
LGBTI+ YOUNG PEOPLE'S MENTAL HEALTH

Experiences of homophobic and trans phobic bullying, isolation, fear and embarrassment.



GENDERBREAD PERSON

Gender isn't binary, it's not a case of either/or. In many cases it's both/and. This graphic is an introduction to understanding.



BECOMING AN ALLY

An ally is someone who is a friend, advocate and activist for LGBTI+ people.

There are many things you can do to promote the mental health and wellbeing of LGBTI+ young people. Some of these actions may be small, but they can have a big impact on the lives of young people.

Become familiar with LGBTI+ terminology

When an LGBTI+ young person has to explain the meaning of their identity to a professional, they can feel as though they are not understood. By familiarising yourself with common LGBTI+ terms, you can build trust and connect with those you work with.

Use the correct pronoun/name

Pronouns are ways in which people refer to themselves, often related to gender e.g. he or she. Some trans and non-binary people prefer to use they/them pronouns. Rather than assuming someone's pronoun if you are not sure, just ask. If you hear someone using the wrong pronoun, take it as an opportunity to correct them and remind them how important it is for individuals to have their identity respected.

Use inclusive language

We live in a society that promotes heterosexuality as the normal or preferred sexual orientation. This can make LGBTI+ young people feel invisible. Using LGBTI+ inclusive language is a simple step you can take to ensure they don't feel excluded from programmes, events or activities. In practice, this could simply mean talking about a 'partner' instead of a boyfriend or girlfriend.

Break the taboo

Some LGBTI+ young people can grow up hearing few references to LGBTI+ individuals or issues. When you can, bring these topics up. This could be simply raising an issue about the LGBTI+ community in the news or ensuring the programmes you run mention or address LGBTI+ people's needs in the same way you would with others.

Mark LGBTI+ occasions

Each year, there are many opportunities where you can participate in and show support for the LGBTI+ community. Consider participating in your local LGBTI+ Pride celebration or marking other significant events such as International Day Against Homophobia, Biphobia and Transphobia (May 17th), Bi Visibility Day (September 23rd), Coming Out Day (October 11th) and Transgender Day of Visibility (March 31st) among many others.

Ally visibility

There are many ways you can show you are an ally. A simple gesture like wearing a rainbow badge, pin or sticker can send a clear signal to young people who are seeking support. Place a rainbow flag in your office or if you complete LGBTI+ training, put the certificate of attendance up at your desk.

Challenge prejudice or discrimination

The effects of prejudice on LGBTI+ young people can have a very negative impact on mental health. Ensuring that such attitudes are not allowed to go unchallenged is important to show that you and your organisation is inclusive of LGBTI+ identities.

SUPPORTING TRANSGENDER & NON-BINARY YOUNG PEOPLE

In recent years there has been a significant increase in the number of trans and non-binary young people coming out. Here, we share some information that service providers should be aware of when working with trans young people.

Some transgender young people will choose to transition. Transitioning can mean many different things to different people. For some it can mean a social change (name, pronoun, clothing), and for others it can involve a legal change or medical interventions.

Social transitioning: These changes may involve changing appearance (clothing, make-up, hair), pronouns e.g. she, her, he, him, they, them, and using a new name.

Legal transitioning: These changes may involve an individual changing their name by Deed Poll and/or going through the process of gender recognition which means legally changing a gender marker (male or female) on their birth cert. The Gender Recognition Act allows all individuals over the age of 18 to self-declare their own gender identity and enables trans people to achieve full legal recognition of their preferred gender and acquire a new birth certificate that reflects this change.

Medical transitioning: These changes may include the use of hormone blockers (to pause or stop puberty), hormone replacement therapy and/or surgery.

Transgender young people can experience significant barriers in society, within their families, health and mental health services or at school. Here are some ways you can support transgender young people:

- Don't share information about an individual's transgender identity without consent.
- Be attentive and respectful around using the name and pronoun that that the young person has chosen.
- Remember that individual young people will have their own specific needs, worries and desires relating to their gender identity, so when in doubt, it is best to ask them.
- Ask the young person what is needed for toilets and changing rooms – it's great to have a choice between male, female and gender-neutral options.
- Please don't ask about or comment (good or bad) on body changes.
- If they ask for it, please support young transgender people to talk to their parents.
- Challenge transphobic comments and bullying in your organisation.

WHAT CAN YOUR ORGANISATION DO?

Creating a world where LGBTI+ people are valued, safe and happy in their experiences is a team effort.

There are many ways your organisation can create an environment that is safe and welcoming for members of the LGBTI+ community and as a result, positively impact lives. Here are some tips to help you get started.

“During a crisis, I reached out for support to my Youth Group and was welcomed with open arms, open hearts, open minds and a cup of team. I am forever grateful.”

Ruan, 19 - BeLonG To



Inclusive policies

Ensure that the policies in your organisation are fully inclusive of LGBTI+ people. Making specific references to diversity and difference (including sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression and sex characteristics) in organisational policies sends an important message to all staff that LGBTI+ people are valued and equal. If you have an anti-bullying procedure, specifically mention homophobic, transphobic and biphobic bullying in the document. Consider creating forms which have multiple gender identifiers, for example not just Mr or Mrs.



Inclusive programmes

Look at the programmes and workshops that you facilitate in your organisation. Are there ways you can make them more LGBTI+ inclusive and friendly? Providing a space to learn about and discuss LGBTI+ identities can help to challenge negative beliefs and attitudes and do a lot to promote more understanding and respect.



Visibility

Visibility offers inspiration and hope to LGBTI+ individuals who can feel isolated and disconnected as a result of their sexual orientation or gender identity. Creating an environment that is clearly LGBTI+ inclusive encourages young people to be themselves, and also to seek help when they need it. In your organisation, put up LGBTI+ friendly posters and a rainbow flag. Consider including LGBTI+ information leaflets and community magazines such as GCN (Gay Community News) in your shared spaces.



Connect with the community

Proactively linking in with professionals and people outside of your organisation can be useful when you need specialised support and can also help you when you are developing referral pathways for LGBTI+ young people. Get in touch with your local LGBTI+ youth group (for a full list see www.belongto.org) and national organisations such as BeLonG To Youth Services, Jigsaw, TENI (Transgender Equality Network Ireland), LGBT Ireland and LOOK (Loving Our Out Kids).



High quality support

Sharing knowledge and awareness about LGBTI+ issues right across your organisation is important as a young person may disclose their sexual orientation or gender identity to any staff member or volunteer. Every support services staff member should have some knowledge and awareness of LGBTI+ terminology, how to support an LGBTI+ young person, and know where to access information about your local and national support services. Consider creating referral pathways or a directory to organisations that are dedicated to LGBTI+ issues.



Develop staff skills

Fundamental to any organisations response to supporting LGBTI+ issues, is the willingness of staff, management and volunteers to be open to creating an environment that acknowledges and supports these identities. Training gives individuals the chance to explore and expand their knowledge, as well as gain confidence in working with LGBTI+ young people.

BeLonG To Youth Services and Jigsaw provide specialised LGBTI+ training for those working with LGBTI+ young people.

ONE GOOD ADULT

Jigsaw's 2012 research, the My World Survey, found that the presence of one supportive adult in a young person's life was linked to better mental health in that young person.

One Good Adult is simply someone who is there, willing to listen without judgement when a young person needs to talk about their mental health.

Young people who have One Good Adult in their life often have increased self-esteem, better mental health and are more likely to seek help when they need it.

How you can be One Good Adult...

- Listen with empathy and without judgement.
 - Accept young people for who they are and who they are becoming.
 - Challenge them to push their boundaries and open their minds.
 - Be there for the young person.
- Being a good listener...**
- Listening more than you talk is a good starting point. Being a good listener is a skill and takes effort, it doesn't necessarily come naturally.
 - Give people time. It's critical to really give young people time and attention if you want them to experience you as a good listener. We've all had the experience, at one time or another, of trying to say something important to someone who was not really listening to us. They may have given this away by fidgeting, looking at something over our shoulder, checking their watch, or interrupting us. If you are not in a position to listen attentively to a young person, it is better to tell them and try to find a better time.
 - Don't judge. Young people often feel judged by adults or fear that they will be judged by adults so they don't share what is really going on in their lives.
 - Don't jump to conclusions. Once we start jumping to conclusions, we have stopped listening. Rather than hearing the story from the young person, we are making up the ending in our own minds. Keep an open mind and allow your ears to really hear what is being said, not what you think is being said or will be said, based on your past experience of young people.

BE THAT ONE GOOD ADULT: TRY TO...

Look for windows of opportunity:

For example a quiet moment, or when engaged in an activity.

Ask direct questions: For example, are you ok?

Comment on what you see (but not on appearance): For example, 'I notice you haven't been yourself lately...'

Be aware of body language: Try to be relaxed and open – avoid a gaping mouth, regular clock watching or looking uncomfortable.

Ask how you can be of help: Young people will want support at different times in different ways, so you should ask how you can help.

Encourage help seeking: Encourage young people to seek help through support structures in their school and community.

Thank them for telling you: If a young person has come out to you, they have shown great trust and confidence in you and have paid you a huge compliment.

AND TRY NOT TO...

Assume a young person is sexually active:

A young person figuring out their sexual orientation is not necessarily sexually active, they may just be experiencing crushes, attractions that any other young person can experience.

Blame the young person: If a young person is experiencing homophobic, biphobic or transphobic bullying/harassment, it is not their fault.

Overreact: No matter what a young person tells you, try not to overreact but just listen, stay calm and then decide how to respond.

Dismiss their concerns: As adults, it is easy to forget what it's like to be a teenager. From an adult perspective it might not seem like a big deal, but it's the young person's perspective that matters.

Avoid/ignore the issue: If a young person comes to talk to you, don't brush it off or don't assume someone else will pick up on it.

Talk just about problems: Explore strengths too, what is going well, how are they coping, what else is going on in their life? Just spending time with the person lets them know you care and can help you understand what they're going through.

Rush to solve the problem: The first step is to listen and try to understand what is going on for the young person. Helping/trying to solve the problem comes next. Be guided by the young person.

Tell them they're wrong to feel a certain way: There are no 'wrong' feelings. Accept how the young person is feeling as that is their experience. Rushing to try to encourage them to 'change' how they feel prematurely can be unhelpful.

Use clichés: e.g. 'It might just be a phase', or 'you are too young to know.'

"If I'm in trouble in my life

I DON'T NEED TO BE RESCUED,

or airlifted out of whatever crisis I'm in

I NEED SOMEONE TO ENGAGE WITH ME

and help me grow through whatever I need to face

Sinead, 19 - Jigsaw

BeLong To Youth Services is the national organisation for LGBTI+ young people in Ireland. Since 2003, BeLong To works with LGBTI+ young people to create a world where they are equal, safe and valued in the diversity of their identities and experiences. BeLong To provides advice, information and crisis counselling for LGBTI+ young people, also supporting free, non-judgemental LGBTI+ youth groups across Ireland.

To learn more, visit www.belongto.org or call 01 670 6223.

We are Jigsaw... We passionately believe that with your help we can bring about an Ireland where every young person's mental health is valued and supported.

We are committed to improving young people's mental health through providing a range of supports, including one-to-one therapy sessions and group work in the community.

Find out more about our work at jigsaw.ie



An Roinn Leanaí
agus Gnóthai Óige
Department of Children
and Youth Affairs



Rialtas na hÉireann
Government of Ireland



government supporting communities

