

Where's your head at?

A guide to good mental health

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The Lesbian & Gay Foundation

Ending Homophobia,
Empowering People
www.lgf.org.uk

2000-2010
CELEBRATING TEN YEARS

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Introduction

We all have mental health. Even though we may not really think about it, it is still there. Mental health can affect the way that you act and feel, and the way you think and feel about your life.

It is likely that 1 in 4 people will experience at least one mental health problem in any one year of their lives. Research suggests that lesbian, gay or bisexual people may be more likely to have mental health problems than members of the straight community. Young people in particular may also have an increased risk of experiencing mental health problems. Lots of people believe this is due to the effects of homophobia, prejudice and heterosexism in society.

There are many things we can do to improve or maintain our mental wellbeing, first of all we can get hold of some of the facts. This booklet aims to give some facts about the more common mental health problems that you may come across alongside useful information about how you can take steps to look after your own wellbeing and that of other people around you. Pages 15, 22 and 23 all contain useful information about where to get further help and information about all the topics included in this booklet.

This booklet is available in large print please call **0161 235 8035** or email **info@lgf.org.uk**

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Look out for our top tips on your wellbeing throughout this booklet!

Am I Gay?

This is a question that in the end only you can answer. Lots of people who are lesbian, gay or bisexual will tell you that they knew from when they were very young but for some people it's not so clear cut. One of the main things to realise is that it is OK to be unsure about how you feel.

Being gay or lesbian means you are attracted to and/or may have sexual feelings for people of the same sex as yourself. If you are bisexual you may have these feelings for members of either sex. You may have same sex encounters or relationships whilst you explore your sexuality, but this does not mean that you are definitely gay, lesbian, bisexual or straight. Similarly if you have ever had same sex experiences that were against your will or if you have had dreams or fantasies about members of the same sex, this does not necessarily mean that you are gay.

You might feel that you're the only one questioning your sexuality, but be reassured that there are people all over the world feeling the same way as you. A good place to start is by attending a gay youth group or joining the LGB society at university, which are both great places to meet new friends and get involved in the gay community.



Coming Out

Telling people about your sexuality is called coming out.

You don't have to tell anyone you're lesbian, gay or bisexual if you don't want to but you might feel happier if you can be honest about who you really are.

A good idea is to start by telling someone you really trust, and who you know will be supportive. It might also be helpful to get an idea about people's attitudes towards sexuality before you talk to them.

Lots of people that you tell will be really positive and will be proud of you for telling them, they might even be flattered that you trust them enough to tell them. Sadly not everyone will be so positive and supportive. You should be prepared for some negative reactions and understand that this may be a difficult thing for some people to understand or come to terms with.

Ultimately there is no right or wrong way to come out. The important thing is to do it the way you want to and the way you feel comfortable.



Homophobia & Bullying



Homophobia is a dislike or fear of someone who is lesbian, gay or bisexual for no other reason apart from their sexuality.

Homophobic views can be shown in a variety of ways ranging from name calling, shouting abuse in the street or discrimination against LGB people to things like beating someone up or destroying something that belongs to them.

Some people may express their dislike or fear of people who they feel are different from themselves by bullying them. People are bullied for lots of reasons such as the way that they look, act or speak, or their religion or ethnic background. They may also be bullied because of their sexuality, this is called homophobic bullying.

No matter what the reason is, homophobia and bullying are never acceptable. Both these things can stop you from feeling safe or like you fit in. If you have experienced either of these things you could feel sad, scared, lonely and depressed. You may also feel angry that other people could act like that. All these things can have an effect on your mental well being.



What can I do about it?

Speak to a teacher, school or college counsellor, or someone that you trust. If you are being bullied at work, talk to your manager, union representative or someone from human resources.

If you are worried about disclosing your sexuality you do not have to say the bullying is homophobic.

Schools, colleges and employers have a legal duty to deal with bullying and homophobic incidents. Once you tell them they must take action and do something to try and stop this happening again.

You could also seek help and support from your friends or an organisation such as the LGF.

Any sort of homophobia, whether it is violence or somebody shouting at you in the street, can be reported to the police as a homophobic hate incident or hate crime.



Stay in touch
with friends
and family

Myths About Mental Health

Myth

Being lesbian, gay or bisexual is a mental illness.

Fact

Being gay is not a mental health problem itself, but mental health problems among gay people are relatively high due to things such as homophobia, bullying and feelings of isolation and loneliness.

Myth

Mental health problems only happen to other people.

Fact

It is estimated that 1 in 4 of us will suffer from mental health problems in our lifetime.

Myth

People with mental health problems are violent and dangerous.

Fact

The risk of being killed by a stranger with a severe mental health problem is roughly 1:10,000,000 - about the same probability as being hit by lightning.

Myth

Once you've had a mental illness, you never recover.

Fact

People can and do recover from mental illness. There are many safe and effective treatments available to help improve people's mental health.

Myth

If I seek help for my mental health problem, other people will think I am "crazy".

Fact

Asking for help is one of the best things you can do. Nobody would think you were strange for going to see a doctor if you had broken your leg!

Common Mental Health Problems

There are loads of different mental health problems that you or people around you may experience at some point in your life time. You don't need to know great long lists of medical terms to understand a bit about them or to recognise some of the signs and symptoms.

The next few pages tell you a bit about some of the more common mental health problems that people may experience. It is not a complete list of everything that exists out there in terms of mental health and is not supposed to be used as a tool to diagnose yourself or other people.

If you are concerned about your own mental health, or that of a friend or relative, it is always worth going to speak to a professional medical person. This could be your GP, school nurse or someone at your local walk in centre. You could also ring one of the many helplines that are available such as the one at the LGF. See the back of this booklet for more details.



Depression

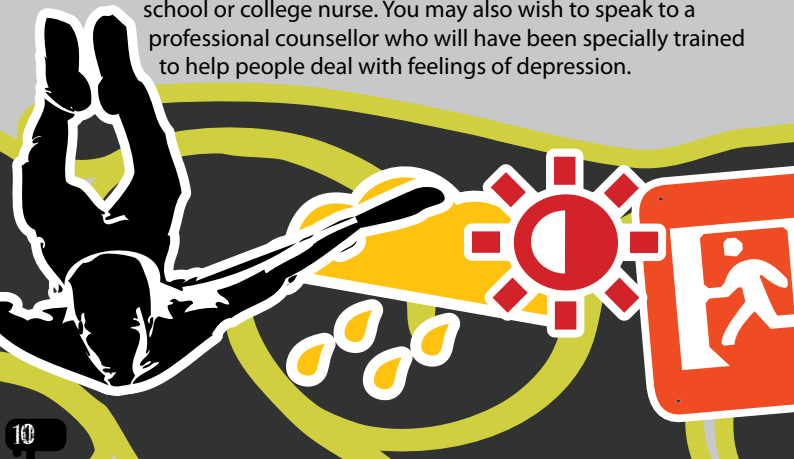
Depression is a common illness that is often misunderstood. If you have depression the feelings of sadness that we all feel from time to time can remain for weeks, months or years without going away.

These feelings can become very intense and might affect your everyday life. You stop enjoying the things you usually do, you may spend a lot of time on your own and you might find it difficult to concentrate or do work.

Depression can make you feel sad, worthless, tired and hopeless. You may find it difficult to carry out simple tasks or even to simply get out of bed. At its most severe these feelings may lead to you thinking about suicide.

About one in 10 people develop some form of depression in their lives, and one in 50 has severe depression.

The good news is that there are many things you can do to combat depression. A good starting place is to visit your GP or chat to your school or college nurse. You may also wish to speak to a professional counsellor who will have been specially trained to help people deal with feelings of depression.



Anxiety

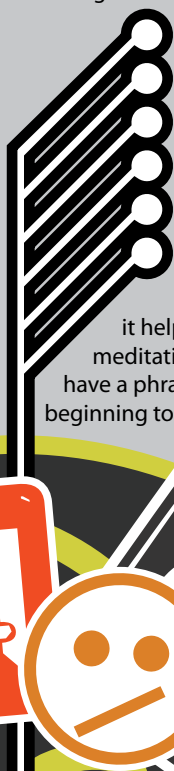
Everybody will experience anxiety at different points in their lives, but if it becomes something that you feel is affecting your everyday life it may be the sign of a more serious problem. Anxiety disorders are relatively common and are often related to stress and worry.

People with an anxiety disorder may experience some or all of these feelings:

- RESTLESSNESS OR FEELING KEYED UP OR ON EDGE
- GETTING TIRED EASILY
- DIFFICULTY CONCENTRATING OR MIND GOING BLANK
- IRRITABILITY
- PANIC ATTACKS
- DIFFICULTY SLEEPING

To combat some of these symptoms many people find it helpful to learn and practice relaxation techniques such as meditation or controlled breathing. You might find it useful to have a phrase to repeat to yourself such as 'everything is OK, I am beginning to feel calm, I have dealt with this before and it will all be OK'.

You may also find it useful to speak to a professional counsellor who will have been trained in techniques to help people dealing with feelings of anxiety.



Exercise when you can, even if its taking the stairs instead of the lift

Self Harm

Self harm is when somebody deliberately hurts or injures themselves. It is not the same as being suicidal or attempting to end your life.

Self harm is reasonably common and can affect anyone. It may involve any of the following:

- CUTTING OR BURNING YOURSELF
- PULLING YOUR HAIR
- PICKING YOUR SKIN
- BRUISING YOURSELF
- OVERDOSING ON TABLETS
- EXCESSIVE ALCOHOL AND DRUG USE

Some people think that these behaviours may be ways of dealing with difficult feelings that can build up inside you which you may feel unable or unwilling to talk about. You may not know exactly why you have these feelings or why you feel like you need to self harm.

If you are worried about yourself or someone else there are lots of places to get guidance and support. See pages 15, 22 and 23 of this booklet for useful links.



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Give yourself a break - take time out, don't be too hard on yourself

Eating Disorders

Eating disorders can affect anyone, whether you are young, old, male or female. There are a few different types of eating disorder that each have different symptoms.

People with eating disorders use food as a way of helping them to cope with stress or difficult situations and quite often they do not even realise they are doing this. Food is used to help them gain a feeling of control over the way that they feel and what is happening in their life. Anorexia, binge eating and bulimia nervosa are all types of eating disorders. They are characterised by an abnormal attitude towards food, difficulty controlling how much is eaten, and making unhealthy choices about food.

It is often thought that people develop eating disorders because of pressure from society to be thin, but there may be more complicated reasons such as depression, lack of confidence, personal or family problems, stress or problems at school, work or university.

Recovery from an eating disorder can take a long time but there are a wide range of support groups and treatments available to help people. It is also really important that a person has the support of their friends and family. If you are worried about yourself or someone you know please see pages 15, 22 and 23 to find more information about where to get help and support.



Some More Complex Issues

As well as the more common mental health problems that we have discussed in the last few pages there are lots

of other conditions that may affect you or someone you know at some point in your life.

Some of these conditions are more complicated and people may need doctors and other professionals to help them to manage and treat them.

People may find mental health problems such as schizophrenia, bi-polar and psychosis scary things to think about or deal with. People with these problems are still the same as you and me, they are people with hobbies, interests, favourite foods and they have family and friends who love them and care about them. The only difference is that they have a condition that they may sometimes need help with, just the same as any other illness.

For more information about mental health problems you could visit the LGF's website www.lgf.org.uk or other information sites such as www.nhs.uk . For a full list of places to get more information please see pages 15, 22 and 23.



Useful Mental

Health Links:

Where to Get Help & Support

Mind, For Better Mental Health

Information and advice, and campaigning to promote and protect good mental health for everyone.

0845 766 0163

www.mind.org.uk

Samaritans

Confidential non-judgemental emotional support, 24 hours a day, for people who are experiencing feelings of distress or despair, including those which could lead to suicide.

08457 90 90 90

jo@samaritans.org

www.samaritans.org

SANE

Providing help and support for people whose lives are affected by mental illness.

0845 767 8000

sanemail@sane.org.uk

www.sane.org.uk

Rethink

Working together to help everyone affected by severe mental illness recover a better quality of life. National Advice and support line: 0845 456 0455

www.rethink.org

Mental Health Foundation

Provides information, carries out research, campaigns and works to improve services for anyone affected by mental health problems, whatever their age and wherever they live.

www.mentalhealth.org.uk

NHS

Information regarding mental health and maintaining your wellbeing,

www.nhs.uk/livewell/mentalhealth



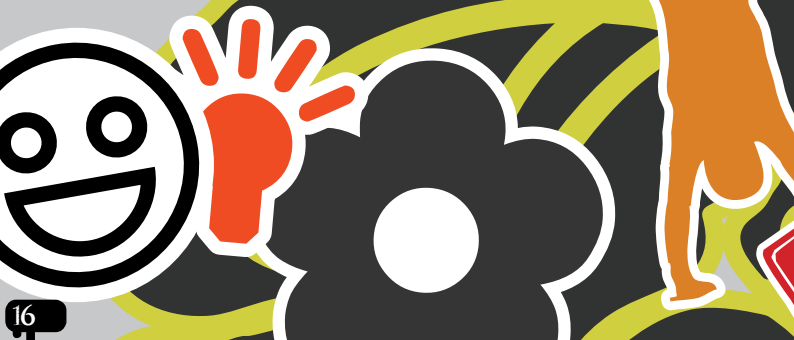
Looking After Yourself

Wellbeing is a word that we use to describe our happiness, confidence, physical condition and general outlook on life.

It is about feeling good and taking care of yourself; something that it is easy to forget to do in today's busy, complicated world.

There are lots of things that can affect our wellbeing, in both good and bad ways. In this section of the guide we are going to talk about the positive things each and every one of us can do to improve the way we think and feel on a day to day basis.

You might be surprised at how easy some of this stuff sounds, and the brilliant thing is that looking after your own wellbeing really can be that simple. Even if you only do a few of the things we talk about over the next few pages you will be taking some really good steps towards looking after yourself and your own wellbeing.



Diet Nutrition & Exercise

Eating a healthy diet and taking regular exercise can have a positive impact on your wellbeing.

Research suggests that reducing our intake of foods such as refined sugar, caffeine, saturated fat and additives amongst others can really affect the way that we feel. Eating regularly and not skipping breakfast were also reported as ways that we can use food to boost our mental wellbeing.

Regular physical activity can lift your mood, help deal with negative emotions and bring you to a general sense of mental well being. One of the reasons for this is because when you exercise, endorphins are released into your body which are a natural anti-depressant.

Exercise and healthy eating does not have to mean massive changes in your life. Small changes such as swapping some more unhealthy snacks for fruit or vegetables or even eating less fast food are all important steps towards a more healthy and balanced diet. Similarly, changing daily habits such as getting off the bus a stop earlier, using stairs instead of lifts, or going out for a walk during your lunch break can all be counted as exercise. Eventually all these little things will add up and help you to improve and maintain your mental wellbeing.



Recognising Emotions & Listening to Yourself



Understanding how you feel and why can be a difficult

challenge. Being able to recognise your own feelings and those of people around you is often called emotional intelligence.

By becoming more aware of your emotions and the things that affect them you can try to avoid situations that are challenging or upsetting and learn to deal with feelings in more positive ways. This can reduce stress, anxiety and general feelings of unhappiness.

As well as understanding your emotions it is important to listen to yourself. 'Gut' feelings or reactions are part of our natural instincts. If you feel uncomfortable or unhappy about a situation, or you feel that you really need to tell someone about something or stop someone from doing something, this gut feeling may be the right one to go with. The more you learn to understand your reactions and feelings, the easier you will find it to make decisions and take decisive actions that will lead to positive outcomes.

Assertiveness & Confidence

Lots of people feel like they want to be liked and thought of as 'nice' or 'easy to get along with'. Feeling like this may mean that you keep your opinions to yourself, especially if those opinions aren't the same as other people's.

Sometimes this can lead to you doing things you might not want to do or not getting to make choices or decisions that you feel strongly about. You can try and stop this from happening by becoming more assertive.

Assertiveness is standing up for your right to be treated fairly. It is expressing your opinions, needs, and feelings, without ignoring or hurting the opinions, needs, and feelings of others. The best way to be assertive is by being open and honest with people, while listening to them and valuing what they have to say. You can use these skills to solve problems or come to compromises where two people do not agree about something.

Becoming more assertive does not mean that you always get what you want, but it can help you achieve a compromise. Remember - you can change yourself but you can't change other people.



Do something good for someone else - you might be surprised at how good it feels!

Relationships

Relationships are really important when we think about mental wellbeing. The things that are happening in our personal and family life are often those that affect us the most.

Relationships are not only about our love lives with girlfriends and boyfriends, they are also about our family and friends and everyone around us that we love and care about. Sometimes we can take these relationships for granted or forget just how important people are in our lives. Take some time to tell people that you care about them, give them a call, visit them or simply give them a hug. These are the people who will be there for you when you need support or simply a friendly face.

Not all of us are lucky enough to have family or friends around us and it is OK to feel upset or angry about this. Without close relationships in our lives we may feel lonely and isolated which can make us feel sad and unhappy. If you feel like this it might be a good idea to join a local group or society which would be a great place for you to meet new people and make some new friends. If you feel really unhappy you may want to speak to a trained counsellor about how you feel or ring a local helpline for support and advice.



Meeting New People & Trying New Things

We all have things that we would like to try out or get involved with but quite often doing something new and unfamiliar feels a bit scary and uncomfortable.

By pushing ourselves a little bit and trying something new we are stepping outside of our comfort zones and facing up to a new challenge - this can be a really satisfying feeling! Every time we do something new we are learning a new skill or gaining a new bit of knowledge which can really boost your confidence.

You might like to take up a new hobby such as painting, dancing or mountain biking. All of these things are great opportunities to join groups where you will meet people who have similar interests, you might even find yourself with a whole new bunch of friends. If you aren't sure what you would like to do then volunteering might be the perfect opportunity for you. By becoming a volunteer with a charity or organisation you will be able to gain experience, have great fun in the process and meet lots of different people. You will also have the satisfaction of knowing that whatever you are doing is not only fun but is also helping other people at the same time. This will boost your self-esteem and make you feel really good.



Learn to love yourself and everything that makes you who you are

services at the LGF

As part of our new range of services aimed at young people, the LGF runs a monthly group for young people aged between 14 and 21.

Each month there will be a focus on a different topic, maybe we'll watch a film, go out exploring the city or share our thoughts and ideas about the things that are important in our lives. You can see a list of topics and dates of the sessions on the LGF website. The second half of the session will be your own free time to do what you like with; this could be using the internet, eating some of the great food on offer, chatting with new found friends or getting some information or advice on a one to one basis. During every session LGF staff will be on hand to chat, offer advice and join in the fun.

If you are interested in coming along to any of our groups please contact us on **0161 235 8035** or email **info@lgf.org.uk** for more information.

The LGF also have a wide range of other services available, details of which are all available on our website **www.lgf.org.uk**



Don't be afraid to
ask for help

Other Useful Links



Lesbian and Gay Youth Manchester (LGYM)

www.lgym.org.uk 0161 273 7838

LIK:T Young Women's Health Project

www.likt.org.uk 0161 273 7838

Queer Youth Network

07092 031 086

www.queeryouth.org.uk

GYRO (gay youth r out) at YPAS (young persons advisory service)

www.gyro.org.uk 0151 707 1025

Wirral Brook Work It Out Group

0151 670 0177

www.workitoutatbrook.org.uk

Halton G Space

0151 422 5503

haltonspace@hotmail.co.uk

POUT Youth Group *Chorley*

0800 783 1524

pout99@hotmail.com

Utopia LGB *Crewe,*

Chester & Ellesmere Port

01244 602 817

www.utopialgb.org.uk

Manchester Lesbian Community Project

0161 273 7128

www.lesbiancommunityproject.co.uk

GLYSS (Gay & Lesbian Youth Support Services) *Warrington*

07747 473 829

www.freewebs.com/glyss

Young Gay Men

www.ygm.org.uk

Outrite *Central & Eastern Cheshire*

www.outrite.org 01270 653156

Armistead Centre *Liverpool & Sefton*

0870 990 8996

www.armisteadcentre.co.uk

ByoU project *Leigh*

j.henry@wiganmbc.gov.uk

01942 203363

Salford Youth @ The Base

steve.dyson@salford.gov.uk

No Attitude *Trafford*

0161 9122453

POG *Bury*

0161 253 7416

youthservice@bury.gov.uk



We believe in a fair and equal society where all lesbian, gay and bisexual people can achieve their full potential.



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