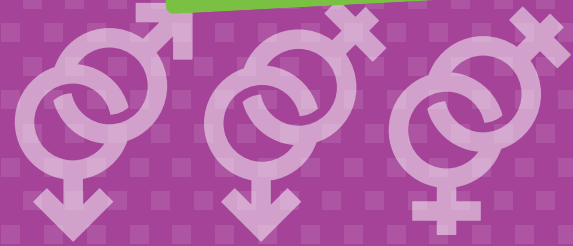




Sexuality and mental health



Sexuality and mental health

Sexuality occurs on a spectrum from heterosexual (attracted to the opposite sex) to homosexual (attracted to the same sex). You may identify with words such as gay, lesbian, bisexual, straight, pansexual, something else, or you may not be sure of your sexuality.



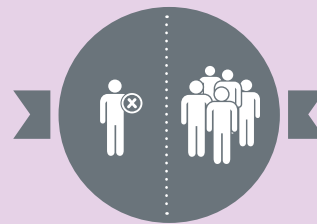
Young people who are SSA have higher rates of mental health and substance use disorders. While being SSA does not cause mental health difficulties there are a range of stressful experiences that may contribute to their increased risk of depression, anxiety, self harm and suicide.

Same sex attraction (SSA) includes identifying as gay, lesbian, bisexual, queer, pansexual and includes those who are questioning their sexual orientation and those who are unsure.

Common experiences

Some common experiences that can affect your wellbeing and increase your vulnerability to developing mental health difficulties are:

- **Feeling “different”** from other people around you
- **Homophobic bullying**, whether verbal or physical
- **Feeling pressure** to deny or change your sexuality
- **Worries** about “coming out” to friends and family members, along with the possibility of being rejected or isolated
- **Feeling unsupported** or misunderstood by family or friends.



These pressures can be very stressful, especially when combined with other issues in your life such as managing school or university, finding a job, forming relationships and making sense of your identity and your place in the world.



Discrimination

Homophobia or sexuality based discrimination can make it difficult to enjoy life fully, have a sense of wellbeing and fully accept your identity.

This discrimination can make it hard to ask for help, or know where to turn when problems arise. If your difficulties seem to be going on for weeks or months, or they are impacting on things like your sleep, appetite, concentration or your relationships, then it might be time to get some help.



What are the early signs suggesting a possible mental health problem?

Things to look out for include:



Changes in mood – feeling sadder, more anxious or more irritable



Changes in behaviour – being less talkative, becoming withdrawn or being more aggressive



Changes in relationships – falling out with friends or your partner, or conflict with family



Changes in appetite – eating too much or too little, or losing or gaining weight without trying to



Changes in sleep patterns – not sleeping enough, or sleeping too much



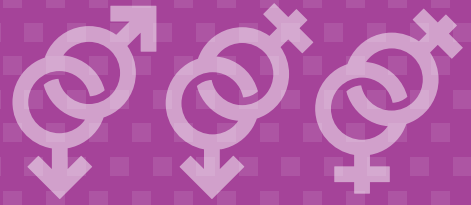
Changes in coping – feeling overwhelmed or tired of life



Changes in thinking – more negative thoughts, or thoughts of self harm or suicide

While it’s normal to occasionally experience some of these things if you’re finding it hard to cope and your social, work or school life are being affected then it’s time to ask for help.

Sexuality and mental health



Getting help

Getting help when problems begin to develop can reduce the effects of mental health problems on your life, and can prevent more serious problems in the future.



Some lesbian, gay or bisexual young people find it especially hard to ask for help. This might be because of discrimination by health professionals in the past, worries about privacy, or difficulty talking to strangers about sexuality. It's important to find someone you trust to confide in to support you throughout your journey. This might be your general practitioner (GP) and/or other health professionals experienced in working with SSA young people.

A trusted friend, teacher or family member might also be able to recommend someone to talk to. It can take time to find the health professional who is right for you. Don't give up if you don't find the right person straight away. Remember that you don't have to discuss your sexuality if you don't feel comfortable or safe.

Helping yourself

Apart from seeking professional help there are a number of things you can do to look after yourself. Here are some strategies to try when you're feeling stressed out or having a hard time:

- Eat well
- Get enough sleep
- Spend time with people you trust, are accepting and who make you feel good about yourself
- Talk to people about how you feel
- Exercise
- Avoid using alcohol and other drugs
- Find time for enjoyable activities in your day
- Get help if things aren't improving



Remember



Remember that exploring your sexuality is a normal and healthy part of growing up. If you want to talk through any questions or concerns about your sexual identity **headspace** can help.



headspace
National Youth Mental Health Foundation

For more information, to find your nearest headspace centre or for online and telephone support, visit headspace.org.au

This information was produced in conjunction with **Rainbow Network** (www.rainbownetwork.com.au)

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