

Are LGBT Young People at Greater Risk?

by Linda Goldman

While there is a lot of controversy regarding hard statistical data, the following gives a sense of the magnitude of these issues:

- Gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) youth may comprise 1,500 of the 5,000 youth suicides each year. (McFarland, 1990, p. 26).
- Gay adolescents are nearly seven times more likely to have been threatened or injured with a weapon at school.
- LGBT teens are twice as likely to use alcohol, tobacco, marijuana and inhalants.
- LGBT adolescents are ten times more likely to have used cocaine. (Vermont Youth Risk Behavior Survey 1995, http://www.outproud.org/article_vyrbs.html).

A keen understanding must develop of the importance of separating societal stereotyping from sexual orientation and gender identity. Focus must be placed on peer, school and family support and, when possible, active advocacy and positive role models.

A by-product of societal judgment, inability to visualize a comfortable future and much more likelihood of rejection from family and peers can lead some LGBT youth into depression and suicide ideation. They also may exhibit a greater degree of dangerous behaviors than their straight peers, or be subjected to more harassment because of their sexual orientation or gender identity. Gay young people can become a part of a *high-risk subgroup*. It is therefore important to recognize the following signs of *any* at-risk young person when working with the LGBT population.

SIGNS OF AT-RISK YOUTH

- Wishing they were dead
- Use of drugs and alcohol
- Sudden drop in grades
- Risk-taking behaviors
- Truancy
- Hurting themselves or others
- Becoming socially isolated
- Promiscuity
- Giving possessions away
- Feeling life isn't worth living
- Expressing self-hatred
- Discussing their funeral

When working with LGBT teenagers and young adults, information needs to be presented on viable alternatives to future ways of life as well as existing support groups and resources. A keen understanding must develop of the importance of separating societal stereotyping from sexual orientation and gender identity. Focus must be placed on peer, school and family support and, when possible, active advocacy and positive role models.



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SUICIDE IDEATION IN LGBT YOUTH

“According to research conducted in the past two decades, sexual minority youth (gay, lesbian and bisexual) exhibit more suicidal ideation than do their heterosexual peers.” (Rutter & Soucar, 2002, p. 290).

“Being a gay (LGBT) adolescent is a significant risk factor for suicidal thoughts and attempts. More than 15

different studies conducted within the last 20 years have shown consistently significantly higher rates of suicide attempts, in the range of 20–40%, among gay (LGBT) adolescents. In a study involving over 6,000 adolescent girls and over 5,000 adolescent boys, they concluded that adolescents with a same-sex orientation were more than twice as likely to attempt suicide.” (Kitts, 2005, p. 624). Rutter and Soucar (2002) estimated rates of suicidal ideation for gay young people range from 50% to 70%.

Although research findings vary greatly and studies are devised in a variety of ways, several reports indicate LGBT youth may be more at risk for depression and suicide ideation. A discussion of the special factors regarding these teens is essential. Therapists, educators, parents, physicians, clergy and all other caring adults must take a discerning look at causes of this depression in nonheterosexual adolescents.

RISK FACTORS FOR LGBT YOUTH

Many young LGBT adolescents can be at risk for rejection and depression. They may seek mental health agencies and shelters with the purpose of finding counseling and community support as a means to counteract external negativity from peers, family and society. Often, young girls and boys search for guidance in exploring

low self-esteem and isolation that may arise from overt and covert variables impacting their life. Some feel that they have few places to turn. The following are risk factors for suicidal feelings and actions in nonheterosexual youth.

PSYCHOLOGICAL DISTRESS ASSOCIATED WITH BEING HOMOSEXUAL

Although *straight* teens may experience some of the following stressors, they become more apparent with homosexual adolescents.

- Gender nonconformity
- Lack of support
- School dropout
- Family problems
- Victimization
- Homelessness
- Substance abuse
- Suicide attempts

Understanding the depth of their psychosocial stress load and its impact on suicide risk can be paramount in helping to improve the LGBT adolescent’s quality of life.

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