



Issue #4:

LGBTQ+ MENTAL HEALTH



Today's workplace is a reflection of our nation - culturally diverse and dynamic by design. Within the workplace there are numerous communities consisting of various personalities, cultures and lifestyles. For those who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, two-spirit or queer (LGBTQ+), the range of experiences with mental health and well-being are as diverse as those found within the general Canadian population. But the effects of intolerance and discrimination can create higher risks for mental health disorders among members of these communities.

There are typically three areas that highly influence positive mental health and well-being:

- social inclusion
- freedom from discrimination and violence
- access to economic resources

Those who identify as part of the LGBTQ+ community are often targets of harassment, sexual and physical assault, discrimination in housing and employment, and may also experience loss of family or social support.

As a result, members of LGBTQ+ communities face higher rates of depression, anxiety, obsessive-compulsive and phobic disorders, suicidality, self-harm and substance use.

The risk of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) within the LGBTQ+ community is double that of those that identify as heterosexual and LGBTQ+ youth face approximately 14 times the risk of suicide and substance abuse as heterosexual peers. Some research suggests that abuse of alcohol, tobacco and other substances may be two to four times higher among those that identify as LGBTQ+.¹

Homewood Health took these facts to heart and implemented a pilot project in 2017 to integrate an LGBTQ+ focus to our treatment programs. Janice Lace, Director of Operations at the Homewood Health Centre in Guelph, Ontario coordinated the launch of the initiative.



Staff in the psychiatry services department created a group and held eight sessions, every other week, to offer treatment support for LGBTQ+ individuals at the Health Centre. At the end of the eight sessions they surveyed participants about the experience. The feedback was overwhelmingly positive:

- 86% of participants said the pilot project was 'very important' to their overall recovery
- 13% said it was 'important'

"It makes me feel safe and comfortable and more apt to seek care," one member explained. "It feels like a weight has been lifted off my chest and I can breathe easy again since arriving at the group."

Based on the learnings from the pilot, Homewood has allocated new resources for a second group and will provide ongoing education and training to staff. Human Resources leaders and executives across industries can also benefit from taking steps to become more inclusive in the workplace.

Pursuing Mental Health in the Workplace

As a member of the LGBTQ+ community, there are many steps you can take to pursue and protect your own mental wellness in the work environment²:

- Therapy can help you deal with issues that you are unable to resolve on your own
- Talking with a therapist may help you address issues such as coping with other people's reactions to your sexual orientation, low self-esteem, thoughts of suicide or self-harm, depression from the long-term effects of bullying and discrimination, hostility or rejection from family, friends or your community, fear of violence in public places, feeling your body does not reflect your true gender, or difficulty accepting your sexual orientation
- Don't suffer in silence. You should get help as soon as you feel the need

Some signs that you might benefit from seeking help are that you feel tired or lack energy, feel tearful, shut yourself away from people, no longer want to do the things you usually enjoy, use alcohol or drugs to cope with feelings, harm yourself or have thoughts of taking your own life.

Support for LGBTQ+ staff in the workplace

Nia Herlihy is Talent Management Director at Pink Triangle Press, a Canadian organization that specializes in LGBTQ+ publishing, online interactive media and television. Pink Triangle is also a Homewood Health customer.

Herlihy offered tips for employers who aim to promote and support mental wellness in the workplace.

"Having a diversity policy is important, but it only goes so far," Herlihy said. "It is an indicator to an employee that this employer has thought about it [diversity in the workplace]. But it has to go further than that. What works for an organization depends on their culture. A training program might work, for others a speakers' series might be better."

After many years as an HR professional, Herlihy has seen a few trends that give her hope.

"I worked in the mining industry before – very rough and tough boys club – and nobody talked about mental health. I saw from the beginning of my career people were embarrassed to say they were going to see a therapist. And now it's very accepted that people can talk about their mental health. More and more employers are realizing that mentally healthy employees are an asset to the organization."

At the same time she says there are still stressors that are unique to people who identify as LGBTQ+ that can add up over time.

"I do see more depression and more drug and alcohol use [in LGBTQ+ communities]. I think homophobia and transphobia play a role, but it's not the only part. Previous family rejection may also play a part. Not seeing yourself reflected in the culture around you; children's books."

So what does Pink Triangle Press do to offer a work culture that benefits its employees?

"As far as what we've created, we have a very homey culture," Herlihy noted. "It's casual; it's flexible hours, and our health and safety committee also takes a broad view of health. We look at more than preventing accidents; we bring in a speaker every quarter to promote wellness, to talk about meditation, healthy eating."

Each place of business will have a sense of what might work in their unique work environment. Expanding the mandate of the health and safety committee, offering lunchtime speakers, ensuring staff social events are welcoming for spouses or ensuring Human Resource staff are trained to refer staff to external supports are simple steps that can be taken to support LGBTQ+ staff.

Additional Lessons from LGBTQ+ Treatment Providers

Alannah James is the Volunteer Coordinator at QMUNITY, British Columbia's Queer, Trans and Two-Spirit Resource Centre. QMUNITY has been offering counselling services exclusively for people who identify as members of LGBTQ+ communities since 1983. James said they've found adding opportunities for clients to connect and socialize has been an excellent wrap-around service to the counselling practice.

"Comprehensive and holistic mental health takes many forms beyond counselling," James explained. "We do this in a number of ways: free counselling, information and referrals to external agencies and services, access to gender-affirming attire, youth one-on-one and group support, peer-facilitated social and support groups, special events, volunteer and practicum opportunities, and lots more."

The resource centre offers dances for people under 25, coffee meetings for older adults and seniors, and referrals for queer-friendly recreational sports teams, housing supports, bookstores, and free legal services.

Once an employee or colleague has received professional treatment in a residential treatment centre or as an outpatient at a clinic, employers can help them continue to thrive by ensuring the work environment supports connection or has posted information about community

resources that will offer opportunities to foster ongoing support.

Both Herlihy at Pink Triangle Press and James at QMUNITY agree with Homewood Health Centre director Janice Lace that there are clear benefits to tailoring mental health treatment programs to support individuals from LGBTQ+ communities.

Organizations can take the following steps to improve the culture within the workplace to be more inclusive:

- Increase awareness of the broader social and legal context in which LGBTQ+ individuals live
- Become familiar with the degree to which internalized discrimination can impact on health
- Develop understanding of the social determinants of both physical and mental health
- Promote family acceptance of LGBTQ adolescents and encourage them to connect with LGBTQ communities
- Provide appropriate equity training to ensure that colleagues and family members are treated without stereotypes or discrimination, and that the gender of trans individuals is not misidentified
- Improve recognition that individuals who belong to multiple marginalized communities may face additional barriers to maintaining good mental health

References:

1. CMHA Ontario and Rainbow Health Ontario: <https://ontario.cmha.ca/documents/lesbian-gay-bisexual-trans-queer-identified-people-and-mental-health/>
2. UK National Health Service: <https://www.nhs.uk/Livewell/LGBhealth/Pages/Mentalhealth.aspx>

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