

Qualitative study - other

Mental health nurses can play a key role in supporting gay, bisexual and two-spirit men experiencing mental health challenges and inequalities

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Implications for practice and research

- ▶ People who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer have poorer mental health and increased risk of suicide than their heterosexual peers.
- ▶ A significant factor in this health inequality is the experience of homophobia, biphobia and transphobia.
- ▶ Future research should evaluate the impact of these suggested interventions and strategies.

Context

People who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer and transgender (LGBTQ) experience significant inequalities in health and mental health compared with their peers who identify as 'straight' (heterosexual).¹⁻³ The rates of depression and suicidality are especially concerning with the risk of suicide in LGBTQ, which is twice as high. The reasons for this are multifactorial, but one theory proposed is that poor mental health arises as a result of 'minority stress' (internal and external stigma as a result of having a minority identity) and includes the experience of exclusion, prejudice, bullying and isolation. This also impacts on accessing mental healthcare due to concerns about disclosure of sexual identity and lack of understanding around LGBTQ issues by professionals.

Methods

This was a qualitative study using photoelicitation conducted in Vancouver.⁴ Men who identified as gay, bisexual or 'two spirit' men' (Two spirit is a term used by indigenous people from North America regarding those who are intersex or transgender. They are revered as it is believed they are doubly blessed by having both a male and female spirit) (GBTSM) were recruited via posters and leaflets in public spaces, social media and GBTSM community groups. GBTSM who had themselves experienced suicidality (n=21) or had lost a loved one to suicide (n=8) were recruited to the study. They were asked to take photos relevant to the topic and to give each photo a caption.

The second meeting was a qualitative interview using the photos to elicit discussion about their experiences.

Findings

Four themes emerged: (1) despite the perception of progress in terms of gay rights, the participants felt there was a pervasive impact of homophobia, biphobia and transphobia, which contributed directly to depression and suicidal feelings; (2) experience of accessing help that comprised poor experiences when seeking help, prohibitive cost of counselling and valuing counsellors who were also GBTSM; (3) the importance of peer support—both informal, through friends, and more formal peer support groups; and (4) finding resilience through self-care and creative activities.

Commentary

Mental health nurses and other professionals require more awareness and understanding related to the impact of societal attitudes to LGBTQ, the isolation and alienation this creates and the impact on mental health problems.⁵ The findings highlight things that have really helped, such as offering a safe space where people feel accepted as they are. It is also important to consider the role of peer support and visible LGBTQ nurses within the care setting as this was particularly valued by the participants. In addition to accessing traditional mental healthcare, the study highlighted the importance of accessing self-care and creative activities for well-being, and this is something that nurses could be promoting as adjuncts to standard mental healthcare.

This study⁴ was based in Canada, and so the experiences of the participants may not be applicable to other countries and systems; however, the findings do confirm themes that have emerged from other studies around help-seeking. Nursing is intended to offer a holistic and compassionate approach to mental health that encompasses the person as a unique human being. Nurses have a responsibility to consider the needs of all those who ask for help and be aware of their own views and attitudes towards those who identify as LGBTQ. Services should reflect on how their approach can be more inclusive and less heteronormative. Training on LGBTQ issues should be an essential part of nurse training and development.

Competing interests EM and EH have together received funding from the Policy Research Programme and the National Institute for Health Research to undertake research that examines mental health issues for young people who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer and transgender. They have published on this topic in peer-reviewed journals.

Provenance and peer review Commissioned; internally peer reviewed.

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