



Mental Health 101

LGBTQIA+
Edition

©2019 White Swan Foundation

Design: Applied Wonder

First Edition

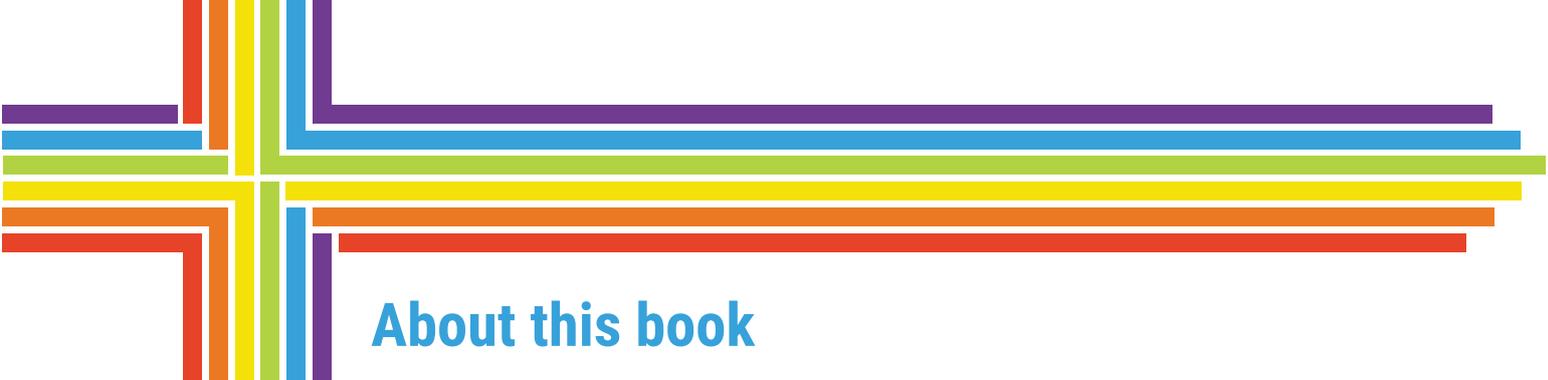
To know more about mental health,
visit www.whiteswanfoundation.org



Table of contents

1. About this book	5
2. Prevalence of mental health issues	6
3. What causes mental health issues?	7
Identity formation	7
Dysphoria	7
Belonging	8
Bullying and discrimination	8
Relationships	9
Stigma against HIV	9
4. Coming out	10
5. Transitioning	12
6. Medical transitioning	13
7. Violence/abuse in relationships	14
8. When to seek help	16
9. Self-care	18
What is self-care?	18
Gender dysphoria and self-care	19
10. Who can I reach out to?	20
11. Seeking help	21
How do I know a therapist is right for me?	21
12. Talking about mental health in the community	22
What you can do as a friend/ally/family member	22
Recognizing signs of emotional distress	23
13. Self-care as an important ally	25
14. Resources	26





About this book

The mental health concerns of people from the LGBTQIA+ community aren't unique, but their identity brings them certain types of discriminatory experiences, and stressors that are likely to impact their mental health.

People from the LGBTQIA+ community experience discrimination and stigma, and this can lead to distress. The stigma makes it all the more challenging to reach out for help.

This book, therefore, is not just for those from the community but also outside of it who can play a strong role as an ally. We believe that this book will be beneficial for anyone who is looking for a basic understanding of mental health in the LGBTQIA+ community, what emotional distress looks like, and how to seek help.

We interviewed several persons from the community to understand the impact of societal factors on mental health. We have aimed to do our best in covering the different kinds of barriers faced by persons of all orientations, or who are not cisgender (*See below for a full list of contributors and reviewers*).

Unless specified otherwise, it can be assumed that all information in this ebook pertains to LGBTQIA+ persons.

To share your feedback with us, write to connect@whiteswanfoundation.org

This ebook has been created by the White Swan Foundation for Mental Health with inputs from:

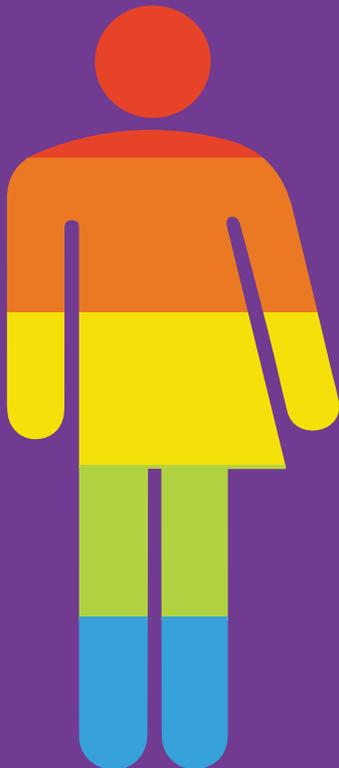
- **Bindu N Doddahatti**, advocate, Alternative Law Forum, Bangalore
- **Mahesh Natarajan**, counselor, InnerSight Counselling and Training Services, Bangalore
- **Pawan Dhall**, founding trustee, Varta Trust
- **Richa Vashista**, mental health professional
- **Rohini Malur**, queer poet and writer
- **Saleem Kidwai**, gay rights activist
- **Sayan Bhattacharya**, PhD candidate, Department of Gender, Women and Sexuality Studies, University of Minnesota, queer activist
- Volunteers from the Orinam Collective, Chennai

PREVALENCE OF MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES



National Mental Health Survey of India 2015-16 by National Institute of Mental Health and Neurosciences (NIMHANS) estimates that **one in ten people** in India experience mental illness in their lifetime.

The National Alliance of Mental Illness in the United States estimates that persons from the **LGBTQIA+** community are:



3 x **Three times** more likely to have a mental health condition (**major depression/ generalized anxiety disorder**)

4 x **Four times** at risk of having **thoughts** of suicide or attempting suicide

> Greater risk of **substance abuse**

Little information is available in the Indian context but considering the social challenges that people from the community face, the numbers are estimated to be high.

WHAT CAUSES MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES?

Mental health issues are often caused by a combination of biological, psychological and social factors. A person's genes and family history can make them vulnerable to mental health issues, and so can their emotional and psychological experiences.

For people who identify themselves as LGBTQIA+ (including but not limited to, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, asexual) social and environmental factors play a big role in increasing their vulnerability to mental health issues.

Identity formation

Growing up in a society where sexual orientation and gender characteristics are rarely discussed means that if you're an LGBTQIA+ individual, you may find it challenging to find friends and family members who understand what you're going through, or who identify with the way you feel or see yourself. For many, it can lead to a strong sense of loneliness and feeling like an outsider. In addition to this, constant exposure to negative stereotypes of people from the community may lead to internalized homophobia and a confusion or hatred about their own gender, or sexual orientation. This can cause anxiety and heighten a person's sense of isolation.

For more information on coming out, go to page 10.

Dysphoria

If your gender identity is different from the sex assigned to you at birth, you are likely to experience a conflict between how you feel and how the world sees you. Deep-seated feelings of emotional unease and discomfort called gender dysphoria can arise because of this. The outside world ascribing a particular gender to you, no matter how you choose to express yourself, can further intensify the distress. You may have experienced intense emotions during puberty with the development of secondary sexual characteristics such as pubic hair, breasts, or facial hair, which may accentuate the dysmorphia you have already been experiencing with your body.

For more on gender dysphoria and self-care relating to it, go to page 19.

 *Conflicts between one's internal reality and the way the world is, can be a source of major distress. The issues start when one is quite young of course, and can feel the difference or have their differences pointed out.* 

Mahesh Natarajan, counselor



"I felt very different from my friends and family while growing up and I didn't understand why, I do now. I think that others don't really get what I'm going through."



Belonging

Whether due to gender identity or sexual orientation, it may be hard for someone who identifies as LGBTQIA+ to find a sense of belonging with their family or peers. For many, this can begin during childhood, when they find they have different interests compared to their friends or classmates, particularly when it comes to gendered play.

For instance, for someone who is viewed by society as male, not enjoying sports while their peers of the same sex are involved in it may lead them to feel that they don't belong. On the other hand, for those who society sees as female and who are interested in sport, access to it may be controlled post-puberty. Both these situations can cause feelings of loneliness, isolation and a higher degree of vulnerability to being bullied.

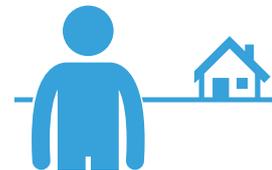
Bullying and discrimination



I had to drop out of college because I was bullied by my classmates.



I just can't find a job, even though I'm qualified and do really well in interviews.



It's so hard to find housing as a queer person.

Schools, workplaces or communities rarely provide spaces to discuss sexuality or gender identity. Bullying and discrimination against people from the LGBTQIA+ community are common at school and work. The experience can be different across different gender identities and sexual preferences; other factors like geography, class or caste may also influence this experience.

In general, anyone who does not conform with the behavior or traits that are typically associated with their assigned gender may be susceptible to bullying. A boy who does not present as 'masculine enough' or a girl who does not appear 'feminine enough' may be bullied by classmates or even the adults in their environment. This can cause emotional distress and also make the person a target for sexual harassment.

This discrimination also extends to logistics such as housing and employment. Many workplaces do not hire candidates based on their sexual orientation or gender identity. Even when institutions lay emphasis on greater inclusion, the policies do not always translate to safe working spaces.



Relationships

Relationships of any nature – romantic or otherwise – form a critical part of our support system. In a healthy relationship both people’s needs are valued, and there is mutual trust and respect.

A healthy relationship with your family and friends can give you a sense of support, belonging and confidence that will help you deal with different life stressors. Having a partner who understands you and accepts you as you are can also be a great source of support.

This said, LGBTQIA+ persons are susceptible to experiencing emotional, physical or sexual trauma as a result of not fitting into heteronormative standards.

While it can be difficult to draw boundaries clearly or to identify violence and/or abuse in any kind of relationship, it can perhaps be even more challenging to recognize subtler forms of abuse from family and friends when the outside world is clearly discriminating against you. You may feel confused about why you are continuing to stay in the relationship even though you’re unhappy with the other person.

Being in an unhealthy relationship can lower your self-esteem, impact your mood and functioning negatively, and affect your physical and mental health.

For more on recognizing signs of abuse in a relationship, go to page 14.

Stigma against HIV (Human Immunodeficiency Virus)

HIV can make a person more vulnerable to mental health issues and the stigma against HIV can make it harder for them to cope, both physically and emotionally. The effects of this stigma can keep a person from getting tested (for fear of discrimination), and can also affect the quality of healthcare they receive.

All of these factors are largely social, but there’s no denying their impact on mental health. It can be frustrating and challenging to not have your identity understood or accepted by those closest to you. Having to keep your gender identity, sexual orientation or intersex status under wraps can impact your sense of self-worth and self-esteem. Constantly having to fight for your basic rights and amenities can require a great deal of emotional and physical effort.

These social factors can impact your emotional wellbeing and mental health. Prolonged stress caused by any of these factors can make you vulnerable to mental health issues such as depression or anxiety.

For more on identifying depression and anxiety, go to page 22.

“ I first came out to my twin brother Aditya, and then my sister Gagan. Once I knew I had their help, I decided to come out to my parents. I rehearsed possible scenarios with Aditya, and had Gagan, who lived elsewhere, on standby in case my parents reacted adversely.

When I did tell them, my parents were shocked. Their immediate concern was about whether I would be accepted in Lucknow, where I live. They accepted my sexuality, continued to give me their love and affection, but felt that they needed more time to come to fully understand homosexuality and come to terms with me being gay.

I came out to my parents in 2011, and ever since it has been a continuous process of sharing and expanding the circle of people who are willing to accept me as gay. The coming out happened in layers. I gradually informed my friends and professional colleagues who were close to me. But in August 2018 while I was recovering from a severe bout of depression, I felt the need to live life on my own terms. I finally decided to tell the world. I wrote a blog about it for a mental health website which they broadcast on social media.”

Anant Zanane, journalist

For most of us, an understanding of our sexual orientation and/or gender identity is an integral part of who we are. It informs and impacts our interaction with ourselves and others.

Most people get a sense of their gender during childhood; sexuality awareness also begins then. The vast majority of people recognize their own gender and sexual identity in their teen years, a time that is already vulnerable, and more so if you are queer. Intersex persons may become aware of their sex characteristics if they realize they have been subjected to surgeries as infants, and when there is a conflict between the gender in which they have been raised and the gender that feels true to them. This awareness can also occur during adolescence, when they do not experience the changes that are associated with puberty (for instance, a person identified as a girl who does not begin menstruation or develop breasts during puberty).

Our identity is partly determined by the interactions we have. When our gender and sexual identity is accepted, there is a naturally healthy attitude. When we receive feedback that something's not okay with who we are or how we see ourselves, we may feel fearful or anxious. Lack of acceptance from others often impacts self-acceptance, and that in turn impacts our emotional wellbeing.

For instance, an asexual person may often be at the receiving end of hurtful comments, like asexuality being dismissed as not being real, or confused with celibacy. They might be pressured into being open to the idea of sex, or encounter other such discriminatory behavior.

Coming out is the process by which individuals accept their own identity and then let friends and family members know about this aspect of themselves. It is an experience that can be different for



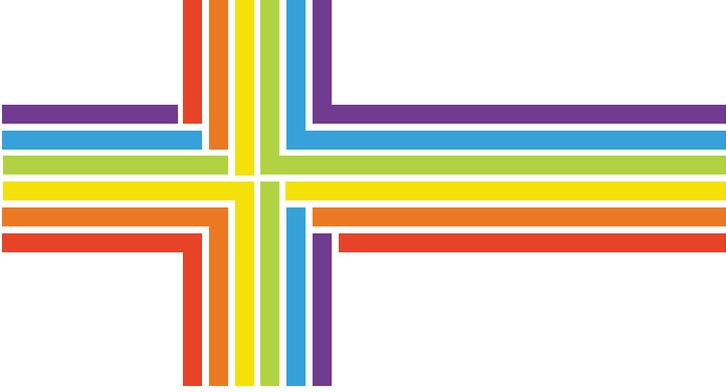
different people. For some it can be an experience that helps them step fully into their identity; for others it may be stressful to navigate the conversation with their loved ones. Often, the worry or anxiety may come from not knowing how their friends and family may react to their news.

If you're considering coming out, here are some things you can keep in mind:

- **Make sure you are ready to talk about your identity.** You could talk to friends or others from the community to understand yourself and your identity more fully before you initiate the conversation. You could also talk to someone who has come out already to understand what the experience was like for them.
- **Ensure you have a safety plan in place.** If you are an adult living with your parents and want to come out to them but think they may turn hostile - plan your finances and accommodation in advance. If you are unable to arrange for an alternative, you may want to consider waiting a while until things are in place.
- **Think about who, when and where.** Begin by speaking to people who you trust. Do it in a place that's neutral and safe so you feel comfortable. Practice your conversation if required, it could help you be more confident in what you have to say.
- **Try to remember that how the other person reacts is not your responsibility.** Your news is likely to impact the other person, try not to see it as a reflection on you or your identity. If they are shocked or surprised it means they need more time to process it. If they are uncomfortable or angry, it may be because they have their own biases or are yet to understand your situation fully. Remember that while you can be open with them, they may need time to accept the situation.
- **Remember that coming out is a continual process.** You should get to choose how, when and to whom you come out even if you have come out to others before. There is no right answer to how and when you should come out, only your own feelings of wellbeing, safety and need to share are relevant here.

If you know someone who's considering coming out, remember that each person takes their own time to come to terms with their identity and sharing it with the world. Be sensitive to this and give them the space to do it when they are ready. Trying to help someone come out is like forcing a butterfly out of its cocoon - it does more harm than good. What helps is to keep an environment of warm acceptance and safety. As a bystander or community member, you can also be mindful of people who are being rushed into coming out, and step in to offer your support to them.

At any point in the process – whether it is your own coming out, or in supporting another – reach out to a counselor or helpline if you're feeling overwhelmed.



TRANSITIONING



Transitioning refers to the process where a transman or transwoman takes steps to align their social, legal and/or physical characteristics with their deeply felt sense of gender.

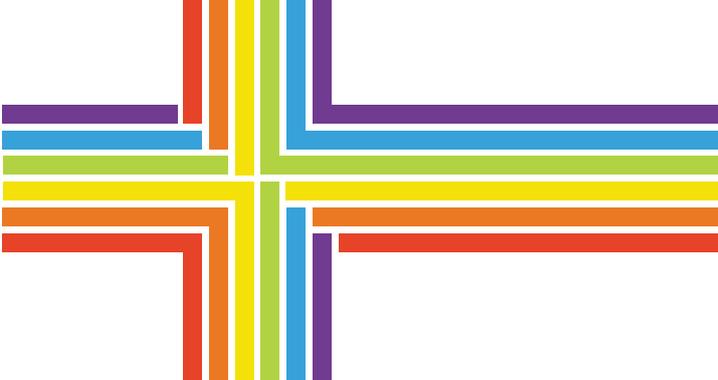
Transitioning can be of three types: Medical, social, and legal.

- **Medical transitioning** is when an individual affirms with their gender identity through gender affirmation surgery (earlier known as sex reassignment surgery).
- **Social transitioning** is the process of expressing oneself to society in various ways. Like asking people to call them by a name they are comfortable using, and using pronouns that are preferred by them and match their gender identity.
- **Legal transitioning** includes changing their name and gender on legal documents.

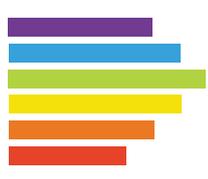
Transmen and transwomen may transition medically, socially and/or legally based on their comfort, finances and/or the community support they have access to.

Not all transpersons transition. Some may not want to transition; some others may not have the access to resources (medical, social, or economic) to transition. Whether or not a transperson transitions they can have legal documents that reflect multiple gender identities. This could be a strategic choice, or due to social and legal obstacles in reflecting their chosen gender in a document.

If you choose to transition, this process can improve your emotional wellbeing as it offers a sense of alignment with your gender identity. The acceptance (or lack of it) from those around you may impact how well you are able to cope with these changes. A supportive environment can help you come to terms with the physical and emotional aspects of the transition. But if your family, friends or workplace outrightly reject or find it difficult to come to terms with your decision, it can mean a loss of trusted support systems, and cause a lot of distress.



MEDICAL TRANSITIONING

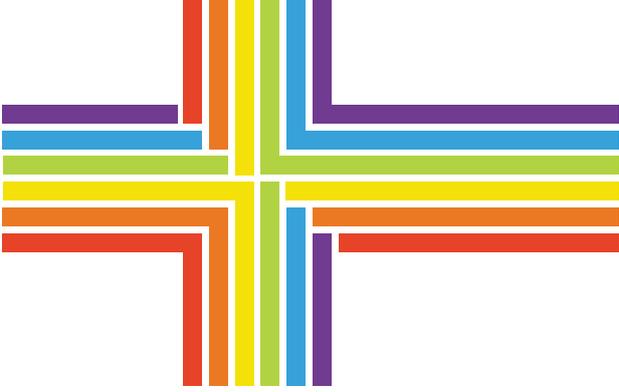


Due to the lack of availability and access to affirmative healthcare, many transpersons may self-prescribe hormones or hormone-blocking drugs to seek relief from the discomfort they experience.

Self-medication can put the person at risk of mental health issues, and manifest as:

- Mood swings
- Aggressive behavior
- Stress headaches
- Withdrawal from friends and family
- Sleeplessness
- Sexual dissatisfaction

If you're considering transitioning medically, make sure you consult affirmative and supportive health professionals, including an endocrinologist and a psychiatrist. You could also reach out to a therapist or counselor who will help you cope with the physical and emotional changes that transitioning involves.



VIOLENCE/ABUSE IN RELATIONSHIPS



Violence and abuse can occur in any relationship. Those in non-heteronormative relationships may carry the added burden of stigma and lack of societal sanction, and this can make talking about the abuse difficult.

Abuse can be of different types: Physical, emotional, financial and sexual. You may be experiencing abuse if your partner:

- Is physically violent towards you
- Controls your finances and expenditure, and doesn't offer you the autonomy to make your own decisions
- Constantly keeps track of what you do and who you meet
- Makes humiliating comments or jokes at your expense in public
- Tries to control your behavior by saying you would do something if you 'truly' loved them, or withholds affection if you do something they don't like (*for instance, compelling you to have unprotected sex*)
- Calls you too sensitive or tells you often that things didn't happen the way you remember them
- Tries to isolate you by not allowing you to meet your friends and family
- Neglects your concerns around health, education, career, or other aspects of your wellbeing
- Blackmails you into parting with money or doing sexual favours

LGBTQIA+ persons may also be vulnerable to violence and abuse from parents, including forcible attempts at conversion, coercion to marry, and isolation from friends, family, partners and the community.

They may also be vulnerable to abuse on the internet. On social media they may experience hostility from people who criticize or attack their identity as a queer person; and on dating apps where their looks may become the subject of comment. Being the target of abuse by strangers can affect a person's self-esteem, while being criticized by people who are family members/friends may leave them feeling isolated.



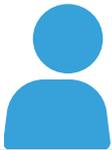
“ For young people, relationships with their natal families are very significant ones, and there can be abuse in these relationships. Some parents and siblings may compel queer/trans/gender-nonconforming children to talk, walk, dress, or behave in ways that they deem gender-appropriate or coerce them into what they consider suitably gendered sports or other recreational activities. During adolescence and adulthood, the violence can be physical, economic, emotional, social and even sexual – attempts to ‘convert’ them through electro-shock or other discredited and unethical “therapies”, limiting access to their friends and community, coercing them into marriages, forced confinement within the home, or even “corrective” rape. ”

Dr L Ramakrishnan, Vice President, SAATHI

Emotional abuse can lead to a state of constant worry or anxiety, lowered self-esteem, and recurring thoughts and beliefs about being unworthy.

It's important to remember that the abuse isn't your fault. A mental health professional can help you come to terms with what has happened, manage your emotions around the issue, and help you regain the emotional strength and clarity to decide what you want to do next.

WHEN TO SEEK HELP



All the factors you've read about so far can impact your mental health. In particular, you may be vulnerable to:

- Fear and anxiety-related issues related to your identity, safety, relationships and acceptance in your circles
- Mood-related issues including depression
- Poor sense of self affecting self-esteem, self-worth and self-confidence
- Greater chances of risk-causing behavior arising from lack of access to quality help, resources or support



When is it time to seek help for a mental health issue?

Most of us feel sad, nervous or low at different points in our life. But if you notice one or more of the following signs for more than two weeks at a stretch, it may be time to get in touch with a helpline or counselor. The earlier you seek help the better your chances of recovery. Seek help if:

- You are isolating yourself from people you like to spend time with
- You are skipping college or work often
- You lose interest in your favourite activities or hobbies
- Have severe mood swings
- Feel constantly sad or weepy
- Have unexplained aches and pains

- 
- Constantly feel on edge, anxious, or irritable
 - Constantly feel frustrated or uncontrollably angry
 - Feel like you're not being yourself
 - Notice drastic changes in your sleeping patterns (*not sleeping enough, or sleeping too much*), eating (*overeating or undereating*) or self-care patterns
 - Find yourself turning to alcohol, tobacco, or drugs to feel better
 - Feel insecure or unhappy in a relationship but seem unable to discontinue it (*because of fear or worry that you may be left alone and unable to find another partner*)
 - Begin to suddenly indulge in risky behavior (*such as having unprotected sex with multiple partners, or drunken driving*)

If you feel helpless, hopeless or have thoughts of ending your life, call a helpline immediately.*

* For more information on choosing a therapist or counselor go to page 26.
For a list of helplines, go to page 26.



What is self-care?

Not all mental health issues may require medical or therapeutic intervention. Often, taking time out for ourselves or indulging in certain activities that can help curb the effect of our daily stressors is effective. Just like we take measures to care for our physical wellbeing, we can proactively care for our emotional wellbeing too.

In our daily lives we come across situations that leave us feeling drained or stressed. Self-care is about taking active steps to address our emotional states, particularly when it feels challenging to handle.

Prioritizing self-care may sometimes seem 'selfish' because we are conditioned to put our loved ones ahead of ourselves. But remember, just as you're instructed to put on your own oxygen mask and then help others, caring for yourself can help you be more available to your loved ones. This is especially true if you are supporting a friend or a loved one with a physical or mental health issue.

Here are some things you can do today to care for yourself:



SELF-CARE CHECKLIST

 <p>EAT healthy</p>	 <p>Take TIME OUT for yourself</p>	 <p>SURROUND yourself with people who make you feel valued and positive</p>
 <p>Get enough SLEEP</p>	 <p>EXERCISE daily</p>	



Gender dysphoria and self-care

Going through gender confusion or dysphoria can leave you in a space that's intensely private, painful, and lonely. For many people not being able to feel a sense of belonging in their own body can make it harder to care for themselves. For most of us, self-care isn't very easy in routine circumstances, and it can be harder in situations where the idea of our own self is challenged.

Some pointers for self-care during these times:

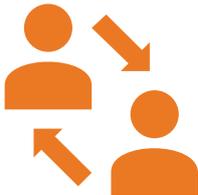
1. Acknowledge that you are experiencing dysphoria or confusion. Reaffirm to yourself that you are figuring out your identity and that this dysphoria is temporary.
2. Be assertive about your feelings and express them. Use art, media, or stories to talk about what you are feeling.
3. Find a community where such expression is validated. This may be in the form of friends, allies, or even online spaces. They may not be able to solve the dysphoria but they can help you through it by listening and being there for you through what is a hard time
4. Research and discover for yourself that nature is diverse and non-binary. Connect with nature; watch related documentaries if you can't go out into parks. Knowing that nature is wild and unpredictable can be an important source of comfort.
5. Treat your body as an ally. It may not be what you need it to be right now, and yet it can still be an amazing resource that lets you communicate, connect and relate. Work with what you can and do those things that you are okay with.

WHO CAN I REACH OUT TO?

If you're experiencing emotional distress, reaching out to a mental health professional will ensure that you get the care and support you need to be able to cope. If you're not sure about who to approach, these pointers may help you decide. If you still aren't sure, contact a counselor or helpline and they'll refer you to the mental health professional who can help you best. You can find a list of resources on *page 26*.



A PSYCHOLOGIST specializes in human behavior. Their minimum qualification is a Master's degree in Psychology. They primarily use talk therapy as an intervention to support clients in dealing with mental illness, or with emotional distress arising from various life circumstances.



A COUNSELOR is trained in listening skills, and in providing basic mental health support. They are likely to have a degree or diploma in counseling. If the client needs additional support they may refer the individual to a psychologist or a psychiatrist.



A PSYCHIATRIST is a doctor who specializes in psychiatry, the branch of medicine that deals with how the body and brain are connected. A psychiatrist is trained to diagnose and prescribe medication for mental illness.



A MEDICAL OR PSYCHIATRIC SOCIAL WORKER has a Master's in Social Work (MSW) and offers psychosocial support that may be complementary to medical or therapeutic intervention. They often work with the families and communities of the person seeking help, equipping them to support the person's recovery for healthier outcomes for the person and their immediate community.

Whoever you go to, it's essential that you experience a sense of safety and trust with your mental health professional.





How do I know a therapist is right for me?

“ When we are able to say I need help, it's time to find a trustworthy therapist. I have been to my new therapist only once, and she seems fine, and LGBT-positive. But I didn't know that until I told her; until I risked it. It's a very big risk, even now that I'm better, I have a better sense of myself and my desires and my needs. ”

Rohini Malur, queer poet and writer

How can you tell if a therapist is trustworthy? Here are some things to consider:

- Check if your local community is connected with them. Can you get reviews of their work from people you know?
- Do their social media pages or internet mentions have any information about their views on gender and sexuality? Look for either positive or negative indicators. Positive indicators would be supportive posts, participation in community forums as a member or ally, speaking up against hate, friends and family from the community, studies/ research etc. Stay away if you see any negative indicators.
- Before confirming an appointment, ask them if they work with LGBTQIA+ people, and what experience they have. Their response can also help you identify how they see the community.
- Consider talking about your identity in your first appointment so you can personally experience how open they are. If you feel any discomfort you could stop without going any deeper, and seek help elsewhere.
- If you cannot find a trusted therapist near you, you can seek help online as well.

Above all, it's important that you have a sense of comfort and trust with the therapist. While it may take a few sessions to build rapport, assess whether you feel safe enough to share with them. Do you get the sense that they're listening to you with openness?

At any point, if something feels uncomfortable, you have the right to speak up and ask your therapist to tell you why they're doing what they're doing. If the discomfort persists, it may be time to evaluate whether this relationship is working for you and supporting you in addressing your mental health issues.



TALKING ABOUT MENTAL HEALTH IN THE COMMUNITY



“Community building, both by community members themselves and in conjunction with service providers, is an important part of improving health for LGBTQIA+ people. They act as supportive, safe and educative spaces, are access points for healthcare and information on healthy living, as well as places for advocacy as and when needed. They help people connect, break through barriers to health, letting them recover and strengthen their innate resilience.”

Mahesh Natarajan, counselor

A sense of belonging in a community where we can be ourselves, feel accepted and express ourselves is critical to our mental health. In fact being set apart and ostracized has long been seen as a way of punishing what is unacceptable. This happens often with LGBTQIA+ people in mainstream spaces. Finding places and people that are accepting, welcoming, celebrate your identity and make space for fuller expression can be a huge source of relief when you have constantly experienced rejection and suppression.

For someone with mental health issues, the community can be a great source of support and acceptance.

What you can do as a friend/ally/family member

Some of us who experience emotional distress or a mental health issue choose not to disclose our issues to anyone for fear of a backlash. There is a fear that doing so will lead to a perception of being seen as weak or incompetent. On the other hand, some of us choose not to share it because we fear that our friends and family will not be able to handle it.

You can begin initiating conversations around mental health, and support a friend who may be experiencing emotional distress. Here are a few ways in which you can help them:



Recognizing signs of emotional distress

These signs may indicate that someone you know is experiencing emotional distress, even if they don't express it explicitly:

1. They begin isolating themselves from others (including people they like), and from their daily activities
2. They show a sudden drop in functioning and might skip school/work
3. They lose interest in things that they used to love doing
4. They look consistently sad, teary-eyed
5. They experience unexplained aches and pains
6. They have an acute fear of various things and places
7. They are extremely anxious and irritable
8. They have frequent bouts of frustration or uncontrollable anger, or severe mood swings
9. They behave in a way that's out of the ordinary (in comparison to how they usually are)
10. They show drastic changes in their sleep patterns, appetite, self-care habits

If you think that your loved one is distressed, initiate a conversation with them. At the same time be prepared for the possibility that they are experiencing self-doubt or lower self-esteem, and may question their own judgment. This is a period when they require acknowledgement and validation of their emotions from their loved ones.

Listen:

Focus your attention on the person you are speaking to, and maintain eye contact – this will give them the reassurance that you are being fully present to them. Ask them how they're coping with their challenges, and how they're feeling. Acknowledge how they feel. Ask specific, open questions: "How are you dealing with that?", or "How can I help?"



Offer your empathy, not sympathy:

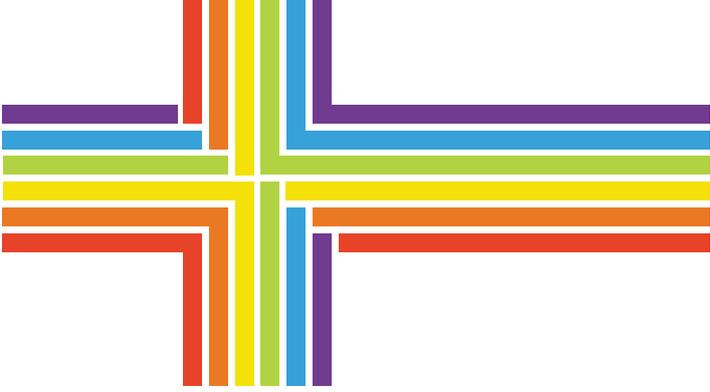
Sympathy is when a person feels pity for another person because of what they're going through. We may often feel sympathy for other people when they share their problems with us.

Empathy on the other hand is trying to truly understand where the person is coming from. It means hearing someone out, engaging with them, and offering support while keeping aside our own urge to fix their distress. This can happen when we reach out to the other person and connect with what they're experiencing.

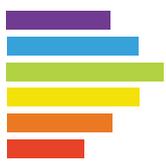
Some ways to offer an empathetic response:

1. Stay open to their experience, don't assume you understand what they're going through.
2. Be aware of the urge to offer suggestions, give advice or share your own story. Remember to keep the focus on the other person. Wait until they are finished before you share your own experience or suggestions.
3. Ask them how they're feeling instead of making assumptions. For instance saying, "How do you feel about it?" instead of "Oh! That sounds terrible!"
4. It's okay to not fully understand their circumstances or the situation. Listening is about being able to connect with how they are feeling in the moment.
5. Ask before offering suggestions or advice.
6. Ask clear, open questions that will help you support them. Such as "How can I help you with that?" or "Is there something you'd like me to do?"
7. Gauge your situation and let them know that if they would like to talk, you're there for them.

If you think you won't fully be able to help them deal with their distress, gently suggest that they seek professional help. You could point them to the mental health resources listed on page 26.



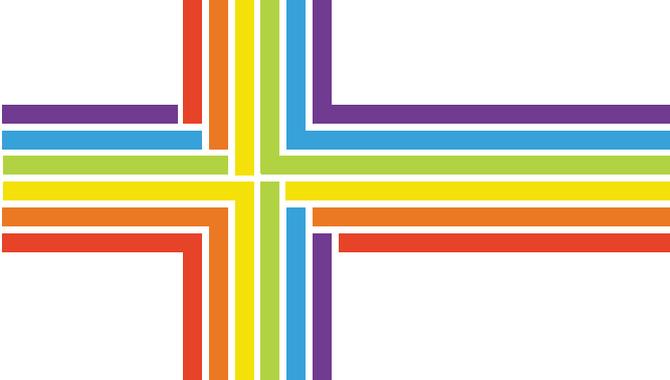
SELF-CARE AS AN IMPORTANT ALLY



For many allies and family members, caring for themselves needs to be emphasized. Especially when allies become really involved with the community. Often, being really involved and yet not feeling a sense of belonging to the community can – if left unattended – lead to ally-fatigue.

Following could be ways to take care of yourself while being a strong ally:

1. Remember that you have your own life as a sexual/asexual/aromantic, and social person. While being invested in the movement for equal rights, invest in your own wellbeing too.
2. Remember that as an ally there may always be parts of LGBTQIA+ life that you may not fully understand or even have access to, and that's okay.
3. At times you might find that there is a deeper connection between your best friend who is gay and a new friend of theirs who identifies similarly. This might leave you feeling like an outsider – remember that this is not a personal attack. While feeling hurt is natural, it is also likely that this is an example of how the LGBTQIA+ identity creates a deeper, more nuanced community.



RESOURCES



Helpline	Contact	Timings	Languages
iCALL helpline, Mumbai	+91 22 2552 1111	Monday to Saturday, 8:00 am to 10:00 pm	Bengali, English, Gujarati, Hindi, Konkani, Malayalam, Marathi, Punjabi, Tamil, Telugu
Parivarthan helpline, Bangalore	+91 7676 602 602	Monday to Friday, 4:00 pm to 10:00 pm	Bengali, English, Hindi, Kannada, Marathi, Punjabi, Tamil
Humsafar	+91 22 2667 3800	Monday to Friday, 12:00 pm to 8:00 pm	English, Hindi
Swabhava	+91 80 2223 0959	Monday to Saturday 10:00 am to 5:00 pm	English, Hindi, Kannada, Malayalam, Tamil

Additional resources

- Visit www.orinam.net for a comprehensive list of resources for LGBTQIA+ individuals, their families, and allies
- Visit www.vartagensex.org for a list of legal and health (*including mental health*) resources across the country



White Swan Foundation is a non-profit organization dedicated to the mission of delivering knowledge services on mental health and wellbeing. With India's largest knowledge repository on mental health for the people at www.whiteswanfoundation.org, we aim to disseminate valuable information on mental health to various communities and help them make informed decisions.