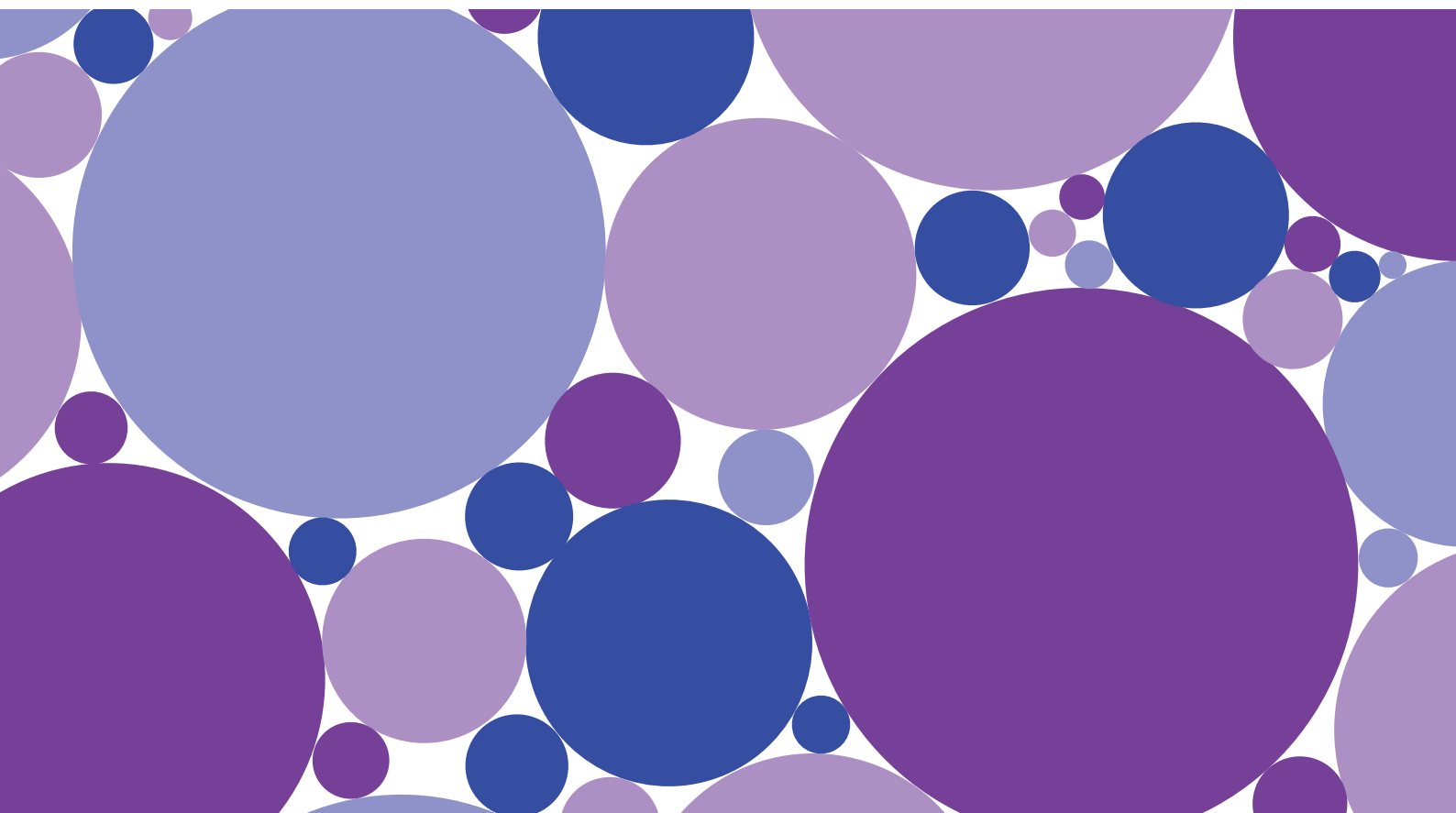


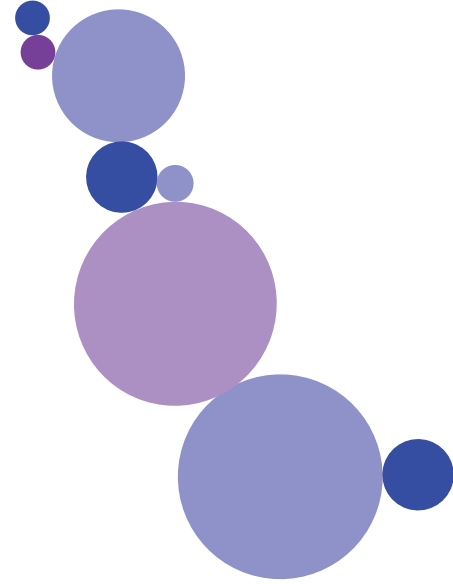
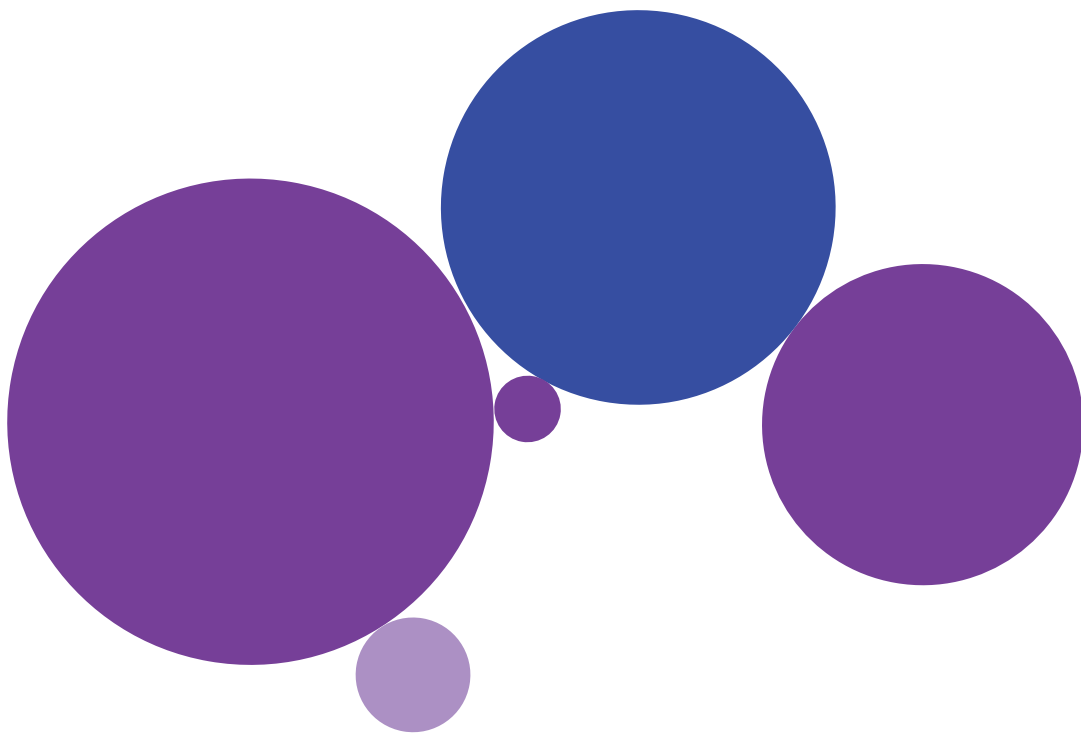
Briefing 9

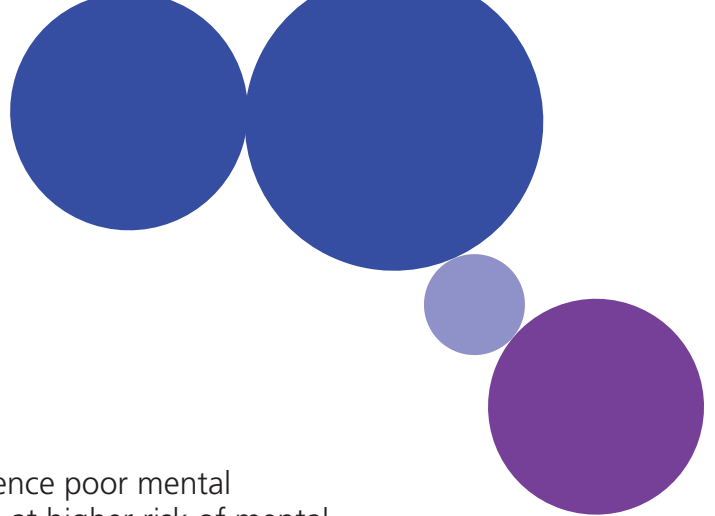
# Mental health issues within lesbian, gay and bisexual (LGB) communities



## (a) Introduction

This Briefing reflects current research in mental health among lesbian, gay and bisexual (LGB) populations. Mental health issues for trans people are considered in Briefing 11.





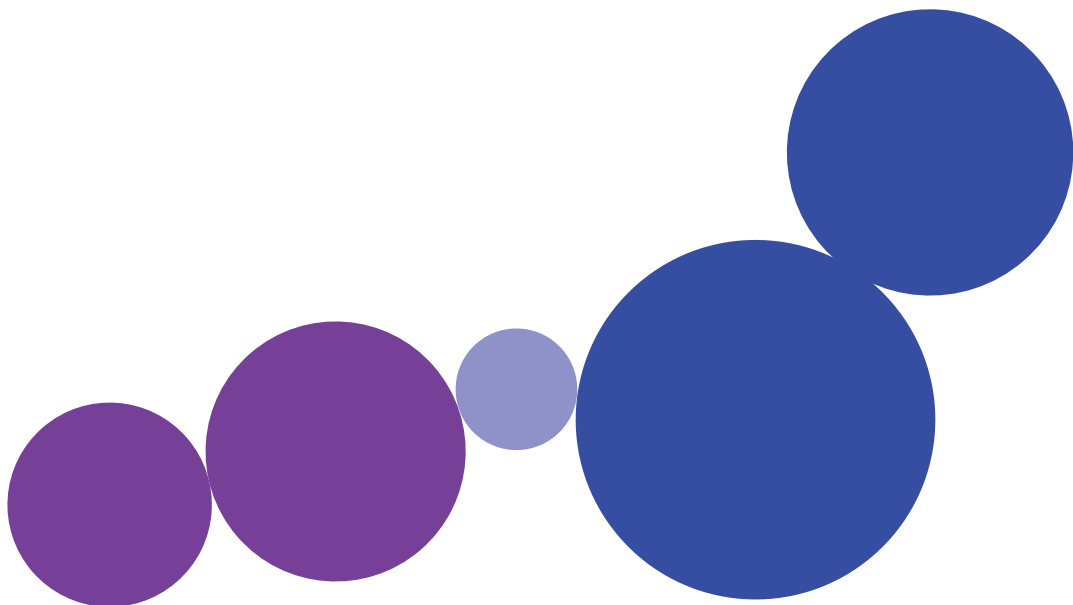
## (b) Mental disorder

Although the majority of LGB people do not experience poor mental health, research suggests that some LGB people are at higher risk of mental disorder, suicidal behaviour and substance misuse.

Evidence indicates that the increased risk of mental disorder in LGB people is linked to experiences of discrimination.<sup>1</sup> LGB people are more likely to report both daily and lifetime discrimination than heterosexual people.

- Gay men and bisexual people are significantly more likely to say that they have been fired unfairly from their job because of discrimination.
- Lesbians are more likely to have experienced verbal and physical intimidation than heterosexual women.<sup>2</sup>
- Discrimination has been shown to be linked to an increase in deliberate self-harm in LGB people.<sup>3</sup>

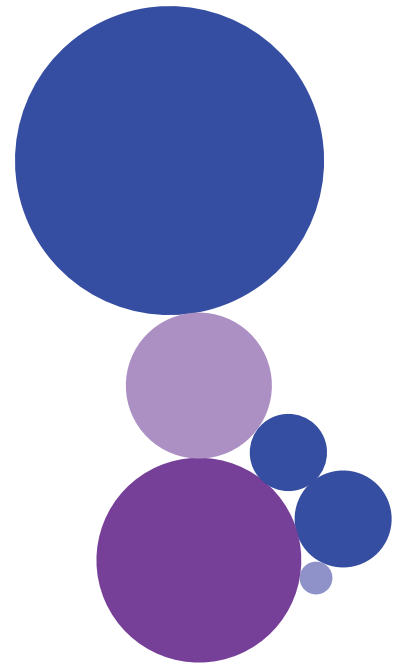
LGB people demonstrate higher rates of anxiety and depression than heterosexuals;<sup>4</sup> lesbians and bisexual women may be at more risk of substance dependency than other women.<sup>5</sup>



## (c) Deliberate self-harm

LGB people have been shown to be at greater risk of deliberate self-harm. People who intentionally cause physical harm to themselves sometimes say that it gives them a sense of relief. Lesbians and gay men are more likely than bisexual men and women to say that their sexual orientation was a reason for harming themselves.

Research suggests that self-harm may be linked to difficulties in being out in society<sup>2</sup> or having experienced rejection from other people. Self-harm is said to be associated with low self-esteem and high anxiety.<sup>6</sup> Among lesbians, those who self-harm report a greater number of homophobic incidents in comparison with those without a history of self-harm. Bisexual people are more likely to self-harm than either lesbians or gay men<sup>6</sup> (see also Briefing 3).



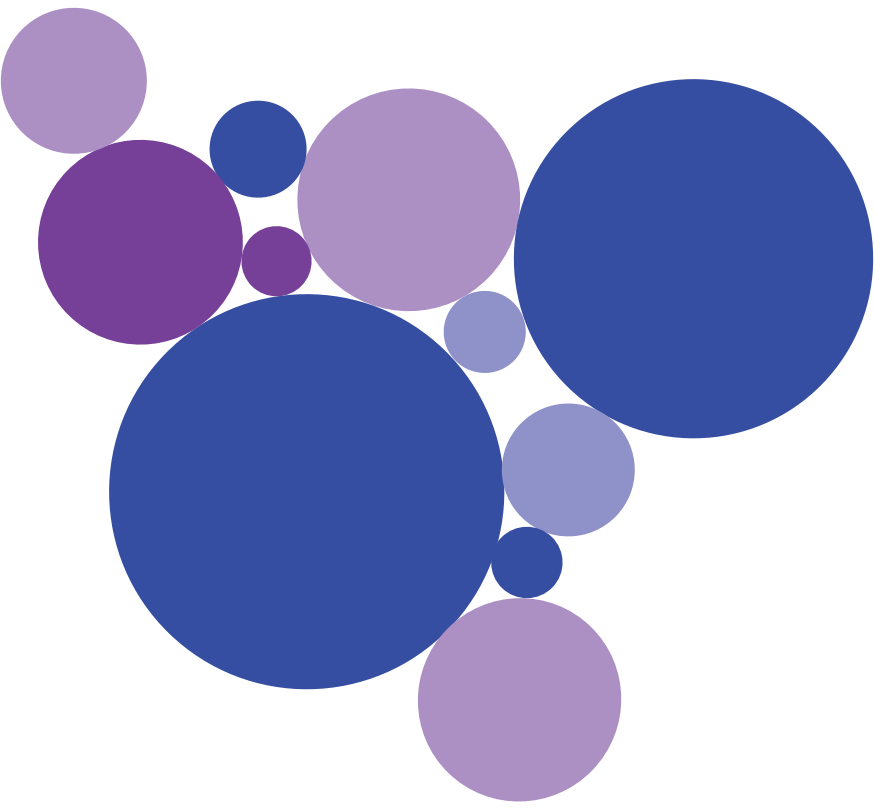


## (d) Suicide

In the general population, thoughts about suicide and suicide attempts are more common among people under the age of 25. However, gay and bisexual young men appear to be particularly vulnerable in comparison with heterosexual young men. Typically, many LGB people begin to question their sexual orientation during adolescence; many report experiencing rejection from family and friends on disclosure of their sexual orientation.

Although the risk for suicide attempts is highest during adolescence and young adulthood, research indicates that there is a substantially increased risk of suicidal behaviours among adult gay men. Gay men appear to have complex concerns, including the presence of other factors such as anxiety disorders.

Attempted suicides are associated with other kinds of discrimination including recent physical attack and school bullying.<sup>7</sup>





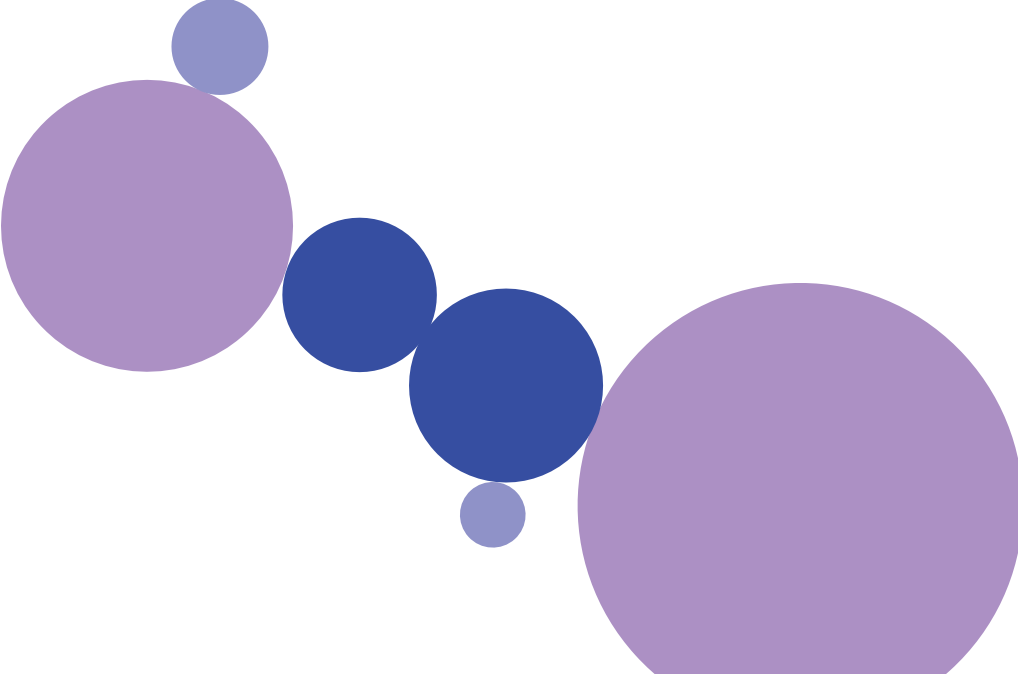
## (e) Access to mental health services

Lesbians, gay men and bisexual people use mental health services more frequently than their heterosexual counterparts. Despite higher usage, LGB people report mixed experiences of services:

- One-third of gay men, a quarter of bisexual men and over 40% of lesbians reported negative or mixed reactions from mental health professionals when they disclosed their sexual orientation.<sup>2</sup>
- One in five lesbians and gay men and a third of bisexual men stated that a mental health professional made a causal link between their sexual orientation and their mental health problem.<sup>2</sup>
- Lesbians reported not being confident about accessing mental health services.<sup>8</sup>

LGB people reported problems in their encounters with mental health professionals ranging from lack of empathy about sexual orientation to incidents of homophobia.<sup>2</sup>

There are acknowledged difficulties for mental health professionals in getting the balance right. In some of the accounts reported, the mental health professional was regarded as insensitive if they placed too much emphasis on sexual orientation in the clinical setting, while others were regarded as insensitive if they ignored it.<sup>2</sup>



## (f) Violence and bullying

LGB people commonly report being the victim of a homophobic incident. Men are more likely to experience physical assault, while women more commonly report verbal abuse.<sup>9</sup> Hate crimes have a serious effect on the quality of life of victims – many LGB people change their behaviour in public spaces by not openly displaying affection. One UK study found that 82% of all incidents are not reported.<sup>9</sup>

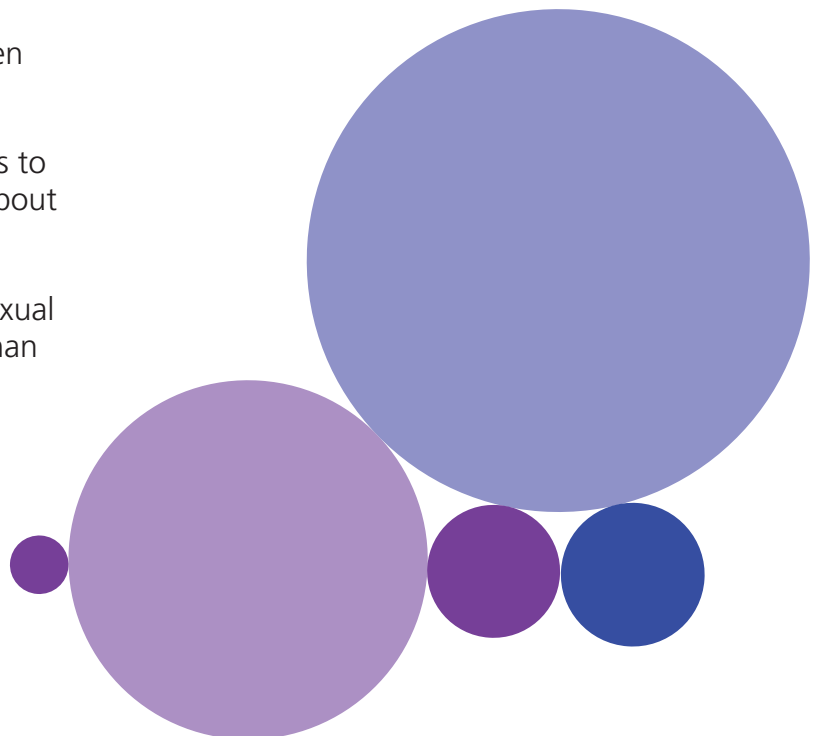
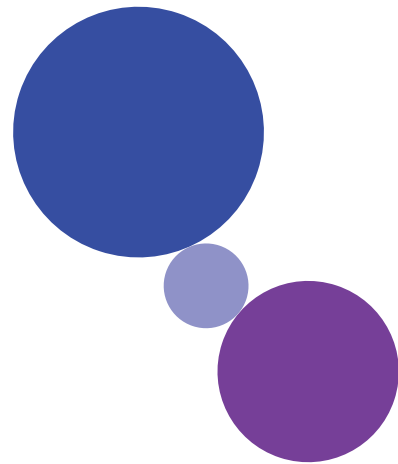
## (g) Ease with sexual orientation

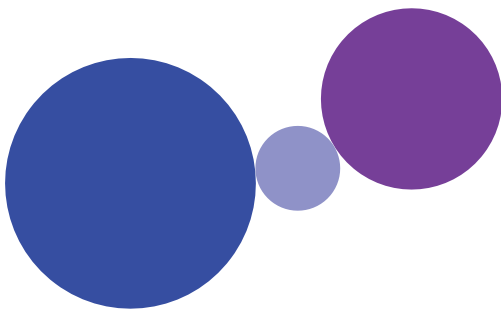
Self-esteem is associated with good mental health. Gay men and lesbians were more at ease with their sexual orientation and more likely to have parents and siblings to whom they had disclosed their sexual orientation than their bisexual counterparts.

Gay men and lesbians were more likely to have disclosed their sexual orientation to GPs and mental health professionals than bisexual men and women.

Bisexual women were less likely than lesbians to report that their siblings had been positive about their sexual orientation.<sup>2</sup>

Lesbians were more likely to say that their sexual orientation was important to their identity than heterosexual women.<sup>6</sup>





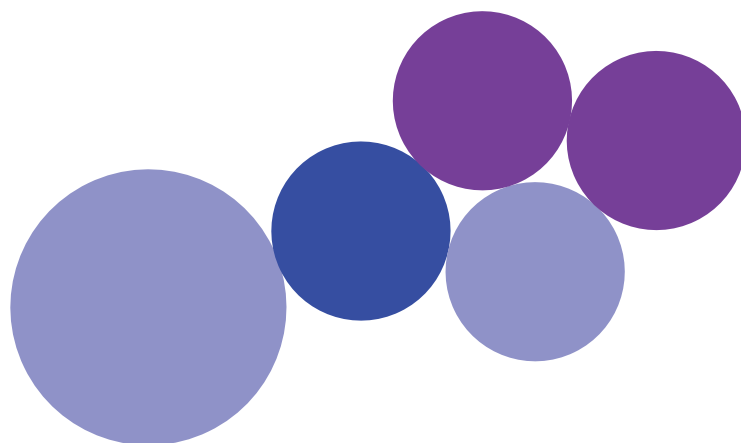
## (h) Levels of social support

In comparison with heterosexual women, lesbians reported less social support from family members and were less positive about how others viewed their sexual orientation.

## (i) Evidence and statistics

In comparison with their heterosexual counterparts:

- gay and bisexual men are five and a half times more likely to have deliberately self-harmed;<sup>10</sup>
- lesbian and bisexual women are two times more likely to have deliberately self-harmed;<sup>10</sup>
- lesbians reported more physical attack and harassment in comparison with heterosexual women.<sup>6</sup>





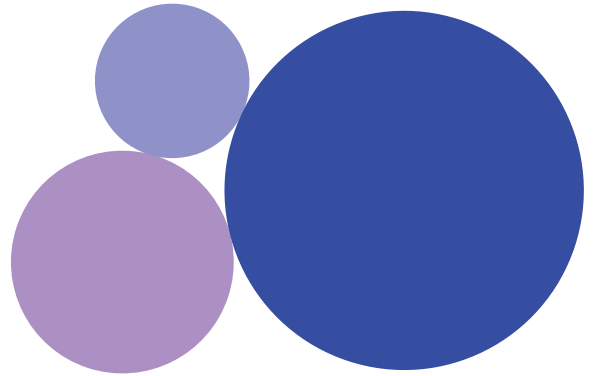
## (j) Legislation and policy

### Legislation

- **Criminal Justice Act 2003**  
Section 146 of the Act was implemented in 2005 allowing courts to impose tougher sentences in homophobic hate crimes.
- **Mental Health Act 1983**  
The reform of this Act will update the 'nearest relative' provisions to recognise civil partners and to allow nearest relatives to be changed by the courts.

### Policy

- **Women's Mental Health: Into the Mainstream – Strategic development of mental health care for women (2002)**  
Has some limited reference to lesbians and bisexual women.  
[www.dh.gov.uk/en/Publicationsandstatistics/Publications/PublicationsPolicyAndGuidance/DH\\_4008046](http://www.dh.gov.uk/en/Publicationsandstatistics/Publications/PublicationsPolicyAndGuidance/DH_4008046)
- **Positive practice example**  
North Warwickshire Primary Care Trust has developed a Mental Health Services **Equality Initiative** to improve the sensitivity of existing services for service users who are gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgendered. The project offers both one-to-one and group work for service users (in conjunction with a service user's key worker), advice and training for staff and a group for gay and lesbian staff to provide support and identify issues that the trust needs to address, eg harassment, homophobia. The project also works closely with non-health organisations such as the police and education.
- **National Suicide Prevention Strategy (2002)**  
The strategy aims to reduce suicide among key high-risk groups and to promote mental health among socially excluded groups. It does not explicitly mention LGBT people.  
[www.dh.gov.uk/en/Publicationsandstatistics/Publications/PublicationsPolicyAndGuidance/DH\\_4009474](http://www.dh.gov.uk/en/Publicationsandstatistics/Publications/PublicationsPolicyAndGuidance/DH_4009474)
- **National Service Framework for Mental Health – Five Years On (2004)**  
Research has been undertaken for Standard 7 on suicide risk among lesbian women and gay men.  
[www.dh.gov.uk/en/Publicationsandstatistics/Publications/PublicationsPolicyAndGuidance/DH\\_4099120](http://www.dh.gov.uk/en/Publicationsandstatistics/Publications/PublicationsPolicyAndGuidance/DH_4099120)
- **Our Choices in Mental Health Framework (2006)**  
The Government's new mental health policy document sets out choices in using mental health services and recognises that people cannot make choices if they do not know what services are available. It does not refer to LGB people as service users.
- *The Mental Health Policy Implementation Guide* (2001) p. 103.



## Implications for policy makers

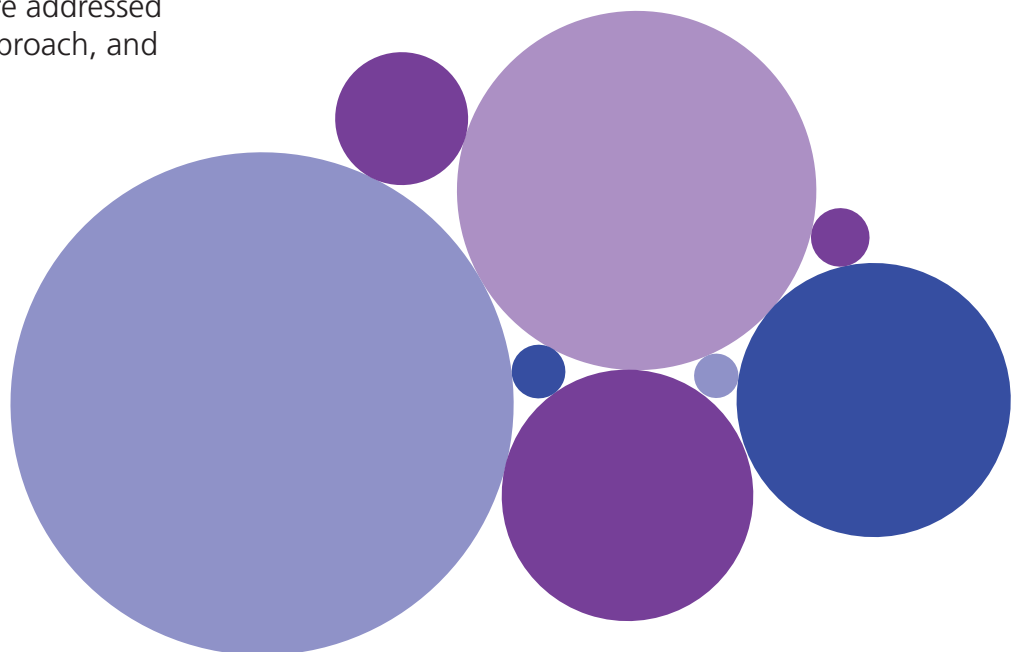
Given the wealth of research evidence of increased risk of mental ill health and the greater use of services, it seems that LGB people are overlooked in mental health policy making. LGB people are at increased risk of suicide and attempted suicide; despite this, their needs have not been addressed in the *National Suicide Prevention Strategy*.

Current government policy emphasises the importance of choice in using mental health services; however, there is little information available about appropriate service provision which could support LGB people's choices.

There is a need for more research into the effect of homophobia and discrimination in LGB people's lives.

## Implications for service commissioners and providers

A report<sup>11</sup> produced by the LGB mental health charity, PACE, made a number of recommendations for including LGB people in the *National Service Framework for Mental Health*. These included promoting mental health for LGB people in publicity and positive imagery, improvements for LGB people in their contact with services, ensuring needs are addressed within the Care Programme Approach, and preventing suicide.



## (k) Links and resources

### **British Psychological Society, Lesbian and Gay Psychology Section**

Provides a forum for those involved in research, teaching and applied psychology in the UK.

[www.bps.org.uk/lesgay/lesgay\\_home.cfm](http://www.bps.org.uk/lesgay/lesgay_home.cfm)

### **Care Services Improvement Partnership, Knowledge Community**

Includes a database for lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans (LGBT) people.

<http://kc.csip.org.uk>

### **Kairos**

Promotes the health and wellbeing of the LGBT community.

[www.kairosinsoho.org.uk](http://www.kairosinsoho.org.uk)

### **LGB Mind Matters**

Website supported by Mind for LGB mental health issues.

[www.lgbmind-matters.com](http://www.lgbmind-matters.com)

### **London Friend**

Promotes the social, emotional, physical and sexual health and wellbeing of LGBT people.

[www.londonfriend.org.uk](http://www.londonfriend.org.uk)

### **Mind**

UK mental health charity; has produced a report and fact sheets about LGB mental health.

[www.mind.org.uk/Information/factsheets/Diversity/Factsheetlgb.htm](http://www.mind.org.uk/Information/factsheets/Diversity/Factsheetlgb.htm)

### **PACE**

Promotes lesbian and gay health and wellbeing.

[www.pacehealth.org.uk](http://www.pacehealth.org.uk)

### **The Pink Practice**

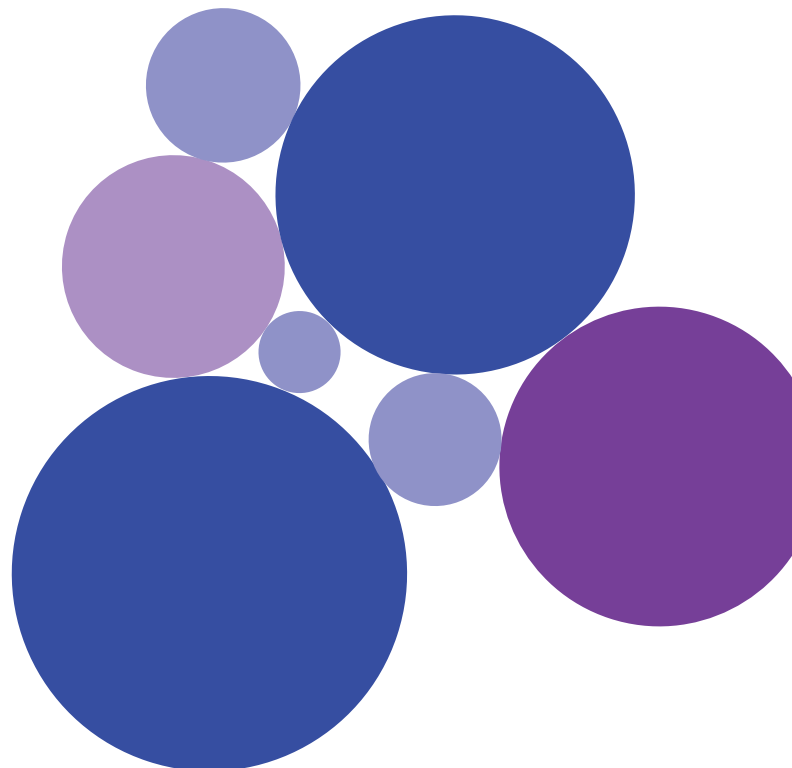
Counselling and psychotherapy for sexual minority clients.

[www.pinkpractice.co.uk](http://www.pinkpractice.co.uk)

### **Pink Therapy**

Promotes high-quality therapy and training services for LGBT people.

[www.pinktherapy.com](http://www.pinktherapy.com)



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This Briefing was written by Dr Julie Fish as part of the Department of Health's Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity Advisory Group's work programme.

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