

Wellbeing of Men who have Sex with Men (MSM): Mental Wellbeing including Abuse

Key Facts

- MSM are at increased risk of a number of mental health issues and in general younger MSM fare less well than older counterparts
- Homophobia, stigma, and discrimination may have had negative effects on the mental well being of some MSM
- MSM have a relatively higher risk of sexual and domestic violence

What can I do?

- Be vigilant to a possible diagnosis of depression and anxiety in MSM given the increased prevalence of mental health issues in gay and bisexual men as well as other sexual minority groups
- Acknowledge that homophobia, stigma, and discrimination may have had negative effects on the mental well being of MSM
- Remember MSM just like men in general often present differently to women with depression and it may be masked by alcohol or other drug use. They are also less likely to seek help. Also younger people may present differently to older individuals.
- As with all patients where the possibility of depression exists review the person's mental state and associated functional, interpersonal and social difficulties
- Encourage patients to talk and listen to what they say, let them know you care about them
- A practitioner who is not competent in mental health assessment should refer the person to an appropriate professional
- Recognise that there may be current or previous episodes of sexual or domestic violence which may never have been disclosed or reported
- Sign post where appropriate to support groups available, this may include community based organisations such as LGBT Youth Scotland and The Terrence Higgins Trust

Background

The majority of men who have sex with men (MSM) have and maintain good mental health, even though MSM are at greater risk for mental health problems.

In 2012 Stonewall published their findings of a survey of almost 7000 MSM, reported at the time to be the largest of its kind in the world ¹. In addition to presenting the findings from men across Britain, they also presented separately the responses from men in Scotland ². Both reports illustrate that compared to other men, MSM are at increased risk of a number of

mental health issues and in general Scottish MSM and younger MSM fared less well than their British or older counterparts.

In the year covered by the survey, 3% of gay men and 7% of bisexual men surveyed in Scotland had **tried to take their own life**². In the same period in Britain, the proportion of all men who had attempted to take their own life was 0.4%¹. 30% of gay men and 37% of bisexual men surveyed in Scotland had thought about taking their own life even if they would not do it². This compares to about 4% of all men¹. Around half of all gay and bisexual men in Scotland said they have **felt life was not worth living** with two in five of these men feeling this way in the previous year².

14% of gay and bisexual men in Scotland were currently experiencing moderate to severe levels of mixed **depression and anxiety** with a further eight percent experiencing moderate to severe depression with mild or no anxiety. A further two percent were experiencing moderate to severe anxiety with mild or no depression². 6% of gay and bisexual men in Scotland **deliberately harmed themselves** in the previous year².

When broken down by age, mental health problems become more common in the younger age-group. Six percent of gay and bisexual men aged 16 to 19 had attempted suicide, and 14% had carried out self-harm².

Homophobia, stigma, and discrimination have negative effects on the health of MSM, lesbians, and other sexual minorities. UK data suggest greater experience of discrimination including verbal, physical and sexual abuse in schools for MSM compared with heterosexuals, with many young MSM not reporting incidents and little support offered³. A British survey in 2012 found 99% had heard the term "gay" being used in a derogatory way or heard other homophobic language. Within the same survey, more than half of respondents reported homophobic bullying. Of those who had been bullied, just under half reported deliberately missing school as a consequence³.

The UK is considered to be at the forefront of anti-discrimination and other laws which recognise the sexual identity of its population. The well being of MSM in the UK may have improved in recent years as a result of this legislation and societal changes over the past decades³.

The internet and social media can help MSM reach out to members of the gay community and reduce feelings of isolation. However, it also poses risks including cyber-bullying, providing unrealistic or over-sexualised representations of same-sex relationships and sexual exploitation.

A recent survey found that 59% of young LGBT people had created a sexual photo or video of themselves with 47% sending it to someone they had not met³.

MSM have a relatively high risk of sexual and domestic violence. More than 30% of gay and bisexual men have experienced domestic abuse from a partner (compared to under 15% of men in general) and around 25% have experienced domestic abuse from a family member, for example a mother or father². The majority of respondents who had experienced domestic abuse never reported this to the police.

References

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