

Physiological impacts of homophobia

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Young adults who are lesbian, gay or bisexual (LGB) are at far higher risk for severe mental health problems than their heterosexual peers. New research from Concordia University suggests that the stress of being rejected or victimized because of sexual orientation may disrupt hormonal responses in lesbians, gays and bisexuals.

Recently published as a doctoral thesis in clinical psychology, this investigation examined environmental risks and protective factors that counterbalanced them in LGB youth. "Compared to their heterosexual peers, suicide rates are up to 14 times higher among lesbian, gay and bisexual high school and college students," says Michael Benibgui, who led this investigation as part of his PhD thesis at Concordia's Department of Psychology and Centre for Research in Human Development.

"Depression and anxiety are widespread," he continues. "To learn why this occurs, we studied the physiological impact of homophobic social environments on a group of healthy young LGB adults."

Self loathing, stress hormones and bullying linked

The study examined the link between living in a homophobic environment and 'internalized homophobia,' e.g., feeling negatively about oneself because of one's [sexual identity](#) as LGB.

Individuals who experienced more LGB-related stress – arguments about sexual identity, bullying or discrimination – had higher internalized homophobia and showed increased production of the stress hormone

cortisol compared to peers in more positive environments.

What's more, LGB youth who showed more internalized homophobia and abnormal cortisol activity also experienced increased symptoms of depression, anxiety and suicidal thoughts. "This study is among the first to clearly link the experience of homophobia with abnormal cortisol activity," says Benibgui.

Benibgui says abnormal cortisol activity in LGB youth, combined with the vicious cycle of stress, could be further influenced by a complex set of biological, psychological and social factors. "This study shows a clear relation between abnormal cortisol levels and environmental stressors related to homophobia," he says.

Protective factors of social networks

Benibgui also identified protective factors that can help safeguard mental health in young gays, [lesbians](#) and bisexuals. His research confirms that social support from parents and peers have protective effects. "LGB young adults who experienced more homophobic discrimination, yet felt accepted and supported by their peers, showed very few symptoms of depression," he says.

These findings underline the impact – both physical and mental – that homophobia may have on LGB young adults. "The effect on mental health of bullying in schools has received much attention," says Benibgui. "Our study supports the notion that homophobic bullying can lead to physical and [mental health problems](#)."

Preventative interventions are needed to protect vulnerable lesbian, gay or bisexual youth, Benibgui stresses, to discourage homophobic and heterosexist behaviors from peers and communities.

Paul Hastings, a former Concordia psychology professor who supervised Benibgui's thesis research, says that this study should push the conversation about the impact of homophobia.

"This study is one part of a much larger and greatly needed dialogue on the impacts that prejudice, discrimination and victimization have on healthy development and well-being in young people," says Dr. Hastings, an international member of the Centre for Research in Human Development and now a professor at the University of California, Davis. "We need to promote acceptance and respect for the diversity of our population – including sexual diversity – at all levels: government, community, schools and homes."

More information: gradworks.umi.com/NR/67/NR67340.html

Provided by Concordia University

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