

Small daily struggles make LGBT people feel like they have to hide

July 10 2018, by Christine Jackson-Taylor



Credit: Ludvig Hedenborg from Pexels

A summer of Pride is well and truly underway in the UK. More and more cities are organising and embracing Pride events, with all the rainbow flags, glitter and defiant political messages that entails. But more than 50 years after [homosexuality was decriminalised](#) in the UK, LGBT people still do not feel that they can totally be themselves.

Results from the government's [National LGBT Survey](#) show that LGBT people are less satisfied with their lives than the rest of the general UK population. In response, the government has created an [action plan](#), to tackle some of the major issues raised by LGBT people in the survey.

For instance, the plan pledges to put a stop to [gay conversion therapies](#) - a process intended to "treat" or "reprogramme" homosexual feelings with a mixture of psychotherapy and prayer. While it's great news that this abhorrent and damaging process is [being banned](#), the report also highlights other challenges facing LGBT people, including some "simple things heterosexual people take for granted".

This has been echoed in [my own ongoing research](#) on the life stories of LGBTQ women in the UK. Often very mundane, everyday things can set you apart, make you cautious or force you to hide your true self.

Minor events, major impacts

One big surprise (to straight people at least) is that over two thirds of LGBT people [avoid holding hands](#) in public. A simple expression of love and belonging is abandoned to save hassle and dodge confrontation. It makes my heart sink when I know my wife and I are going to let go of each other's hand; she gives my hand an extra little squeeze to tell me it's okay, and we let go while people pass. You make your relationship invisible.

LGBT people calculate whether they should come out at work; 30% aren't open about their sexuality with senior colleagues, and 57% aren't open with customers or clients. Casual Monday morning chats about what you did at the weekend become a minefield. One of my participants, a community health practitioner, loves chatting with her patients: it's a big part of her job. But she's always careful not to mention her girlfriend, for fear of making patients uncomfortable.

One trans participant in my research spends time with her children at the weekends. They're a close family unit, but she can't help but be distracted by stares from others in restaurants. She steels herself against this and hopes the kids don't notice.

The birth of a child is a monumental life event. Another of my participants was aggressively questioned about who she was when trying to return to the maternity ward after her partner gave birth. She had to prove herself, repeatedly, to have access to her family when emotionally and physically exhausted – something the new fathers around her were not asked to do.

Finding happiness in diversity

At best, these instances are irritating; deserving of an eye roll, then you move on. At worst, they [undermine your sense of self](#), they make you feel you have no place in the world. You can see why this might make people feel less content, less secure in themselves. You can see why even these every day, "little" things might [affect the health and happiness](#) of an LGBT person.

"Coming out" isn't something you have to do once. There's no huge sigh of relief, when everyone knows. You do it continually; you give that part of yourself over to new people you meet. You run the ever-present risk of awkward conversations, [discrimination](#), [even violence](#). These are the

challenges LGBT people are facing and it's these every day experiences that the government also needs to address.

The government's [75 point action plan](#) includes proposals to make sex education in schools more inclusive. These are very welcome and badly needed as a generation of LGBT children were not, and still are not, prepared for later life. The legacy of [Section 28](#) – a law that until 15 years ago prohibited local authorities from "promoting homosexuality", especially in schools—still looms.

Awareness and diversity training for NHS staff is vital, particularly for trans people; 21% said their specific needs were ignored when accessing health care. LGBT people must be taken more seriously by the criminal justice system, especially when reporting hate crimes. Echoing [previous studies](#), LGBT people still fear they will be treated worse than straight victims of crime.

If the world we live in was more accepting of difference – not just in terms of sexual and gender identity, but of all the rich and magnificent forms of diversity we are lucky to have in the UK – surely more people would be satisfied with their lives. The new action plan is to be welcomed. But enabling people to feel like it is okay to be who they are from the moment they wake up might take more than 75 action points.

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