

New research reveals how the marriage equality debate damaged LGBT Australians' mental health

January 24 2019, by Stefano Verrelli, Fiona White, Lauren Harvey And Michael R. Pulciani

Although Australia has now achieved marriage equality, the topics of sexuality and gender identity continue to spark heated – and often discriminatory – public debates.

Most recently, the issues of [religious freedoms and anti-discrimination laws](#), the Safe Schools program, and [gay conversion therapy](#) have dominated public and political discourse.

[New research](#) has suggested that such divisive debates have the potential to harm the mental [health](#) of LGBT people. These findings come from our nationwide study conducted during the [Australian Marriage Law Postal Survey](#) in 2017.

Mental health and discrimination

The mental health of LGBT people is among the poorest in Australia. According to the [most recent estimates](#), LGBT Australians are more likely than non-LGBT Australians to be diagnosed with a mental disorder, attempt suicide and commit acts of self-harm in their lifetimes. The most [common explanation](#) for this is related to their frequent experiences with prejudice and discrimination.

During the postal survey, many [mental health organisations](#) and [marriage](#)

[equality advocates](#) publicly argued against a national vote on [same-sex marriage](#). They often cited previous [international research](#) that showed marriage [equality](#) debates are a health risk for the LGBT community.

To test if this would also be the case in Australia, we asked 1,305 same-sex-attracted people from across Australia to report how often they were exposed to messages from each side of the marriage debate, as well as their current levels of depression, anxiety and stress.

We found that increased exposure to the "no" campaign was related to poorer mental health. This included increased levels of depression, anxiety and stress, and was independent of people's age, gender and socioeconomic status. On the other hand, people's exposure to the "yes" campaign had no overall benefit for same-sex-attracted Australians.

Fortunately, this was not the whole story.

Social support protects mental health

We also examined an important factor that could protect the mental health of same-sex-attracted Australians during this period. Past research has shown that feeling accepted and supported by the people around you is important for mental well-being.

To test the role of [social support](#) during the marriage equality debate, we asked participants whether they believed their immediate social circles voted "yes" or "no" for same-sex marriage.

The results showed that same-sex-attracted people who believed their close family and friends had voted in favour of marriage equality reported significantly better mental health. Support from one's immediate social circles was also found to shield against some of the harm done by the negative side of the same-sex marriage debate.

Although we initially found that people's exposure to the "yes" campaign was unrelated to their mental health, the final results painted a far more complex picture. Same-sex-attracted people who believed they did not have support for marriage equality at home or at work actually benefited the most from these public messages of support.

New year, new debate

Our findings confirm what we already knew going into the national vote on same-sex [marriage](#): public debates on issues relevant to the rights of minority groups have the potential to harm their mental health. But important lessons can be learnt from this research.

First, as our nation continues to debate issues of sexuality and [gender identity](#), we need to ensure that these discussions are conducted with care and respect. Failing to do so can have serious [mental health](#) consequences for many of Australia's most vulnerable populations.

Second, in the current social and political climate, LGBT allies and community organisations play an important role in promoting messages of [support](#) and acceptance. These messages are being heard loud and clear, especially among those who need to hear them the most.

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Provided by The Conversation

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