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NCFY REPORTS

Connectedness Is Key to Preventing Suicide Among Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Youth



When young people call the [Trevor Project's](#) toll-free national crisis and suicide-prevention line for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender youth, they may never have confided their sexuality or gender identity to anyone. They may not have fully accepted it themselves.

Others have come out to disapproving or rejecting family and friends. "Most of our callers let us know that they feel alone and they feel like no one understands them and they have no one to talk to," says Phoenix Schneider, who directs the Los Angeles organization's prevention efforts.

Struggling with frightening feelings of rejection and isolation, some callers think they'd be better off dead.

The Trevor Project's callers are not alone in their distress. Lesbian, gay and bisexual youth are up to [three times more likely than their heterosexual peers to have suicidal thoughts and up to seven times more likely to try to take their own lives](#) (PDF, 417.86 KB). In an effort to reverse the statistics, organizations like the Trevor Project are not only intervening when youth confront suicidal feelings, but also exploring ways to address the root causes of these youths' higher rates of attempting and completing suicide.



'A Perfect Storm'

In the general population, suicide and suicidal feelings are associated with substance abuse and mental illnesses

such as anxiety and depression, says Ann Haas, who directs the prevention efforts of the [American Foundation for Suicide Prevention](#), a research, policy and education organization in New York. Social isolation and hopelessness also play a role.



In addition, Haas says, “There’s a considerable amount of data that points to higher levels of depression, anxiety and substance abuse in lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender populations.” Higher rates of mental illness combined with the everyday stress of discrimination could account for the greater likelihood of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender youth considering or attempting suicide, she says, especially around the time that they come out.

“It’s a perfect storm in some cases,” says Marisa Howard-Karp, director of the GLBT Youth Support Project at [Health Imperatives](#), a Brockton, MA, community health and human services organization. “You have a young person who’s trying to sort out their sexual identity, or they may be very clear on what it is. They don’t know if their parents are going to be supportive. They don’t know if their teachers are going to be supportive. They may or may not know if their friends are going to be supportive. So right there you have a lot of isolation.”

Research suggests that young people whose sexual identity is accepted and who have strong social connections are less at risk than young people who are rejected by family, friends, peers or their communities. “It’s not a risk factor to be gay or lesbian or bisexual or transgender,” Schneider says. “It’s more the way young people are treated that leads them to consider suicide.”

Holistic Approach

Regardless of youths’ sexuality or gender identity, suicide can often be prevented. Youth workers who suspect a young person is thinking about or may attempt suicide should seek professional help immediately. In addition, Schneider and experts from the [National Suicide Prevention Lifeline](#) and [LifeSavers Training Corp.](#), a Carbondale, IL, organization that trains adolescents to help their peers cope with suicidal feelings and other problems, give this advice:

- Listen without judging.
- Don’t promise to keep a young person’s suicidal feelings or plans a secret.
- Offer to help the youth talk to his or her parents.
- Offer to go with the youth to see a mental health professional.
- Ask about the youth’s feelings: “How are you coping? What are you doing to deal with these things?”
- Validate the young person’s feelings while emphasizing that things will get better.

In addition to intervening when a young person is in crisis, youth workers can take a holistic approach to suicide prevention. For example, efforts such as the Trevor Project and Health Imperatives’ GLBT Youth Support Project go beyond educating young people and adults about the warning signs of suicidal behavior and the ways to help someone who wants to die. These projects also work to reduce bullying, promote gay-straight alliances, advocate for positive media portrayals of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people and train those who come in contact with young people – youth workers, teachers, school administrators, caregivers, foster families



and others – to better understand and reach out to lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender youth.

Schneider says promoting greater acceptance through all of these means is an important step to improving youths' view of the future. "When young people can see positive portrayals of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people, they think, 'OK, I have role models and I have hope,'" he says.

Youth workers can start with their own organizations, Howard-Karp says. "It's all about creating safe and supportive spaces. And not just one where people are fine with it. But places that are going out of their way to make the point that GLBTQ folks are welcome and will be supported and will have their needs met the same way as anybody who walks in the door."

For more recommendations on preventing suicide among lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender youth, see "Suicide Risk and Prevention for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Youth" by the [Suicide Prevention Resource Center](#), a project of the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

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