

SAMARITANS

IRELAND

Supporting Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual & Transgender (LGBT) Callers

An Introduction for Samaritans Volunteers



Feidhmeannacht na Seirbhíse Sláinte
Health Service Executive
National Office for Suicide Prevention



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Introduction

Life in Ireland has improved for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) people in recent years and our society has seen many positive changes. Not long ago the only sexual or gender norm that many people in Ireland recognised was that of heterosexuality and a heterosexual couple. Now, as a society, we are becoming more comfortable with many different forms of identity as well as partnership and family structures, and our definition of what is 'normal' has widened and evolved to become much more inclusive.

However, many lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender members of society still experience intolerance, discrimination and inequality. Many feel that they need to hide their sexual or gender identity for fear of negative reactions from the people around them. Ireland today should be a place where all LGBT people can feel safe and confident about being open about their identity at home, in work and within the wider community; where LGBT people are included and not discriminated against in legislation and in service provision; and where relationships between LGBT people are seen as no different to relationships between heterosexual or non-transgender people.

This guide is written for Samaritans volunteers to support them in providing a confidential, non-judgemental listening service to LGBT callers. It aims to advance their understanding of the circumstances and experiences of LGBT people in Ireland so that they may better understand the issues callers may be dealing with. In addition to the general reasons for someone calling Samaritans, there are specific issues that LGBT callers may be facing. They can also face challenges and barriers which Samaritans volunteers can help reduce or eliminate. The guide includes good practice guidelines for Samaritans volunteers and the appendix contains a list of LGBT organisations and services in Ireland as well as a reading reference list.

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GLÉN – Gay & Lesbian Equality Network

Definitions¹

Lesbian: A lesbian woman is one who is romantically, sexually and/or emotionally attracted to women. Many lesbians prefer to be called lesbian rather than gay.

Gay: A gay man is one who is romantically, sexually and/or emotionally attracted to men. The word gay can be used to refer generally to lesbian, gay and bisexual people but many women prefer to be called lesbian. Most gay people don't like to be referred to as homosexual because of the negative historical associations with this word and because the word gay better reflects their identity.

Bisexual: A bisexual person is someone who is romantically, sexually and/or emotionally attracted to people of both sexes.

Transgender or Trans is an umbrella term used to describe people whose gender identity (internal feeling of being male or female) and/or gender expression, differs from that associated with their birth sex. Not everyone whose appearance or behaviour is gender-atypical will identify as a transgender person. Many transgender people live part-time or full-time in another gender. Transgender people can identify as transsexual, transvestite or another gender identity.

Gender Identity: One's *gender identity* refers to whether one feels male, female or transgender (regardless of one's biological sex). *Gender expression* refers to outwardly expressing one's gender identity.

Transsexual people live or wish to live full time as members of the gender other than that assigned at birth. Transsexual people can seek medical interventions, such as hormones and surgery, to make their bodies fit as much as possible with their preferred gender. The process of transitioning from one gender to another is called gender reassignment. Biological females who wish to live and be recognised as men are called female-to-male (FTM) transsexuals or trans men. Biological males who wish to live and be recognised as women are called male-to-female (MTF) transsexuals or trans women.

Transvestite or cross-dressing individuals are thought to comprise the largest transgender sub-group. Cross-dressers sometimes wear clothes considered appropriate to a different gender. They vary in how completely they dress (from one article of clothing to fully cross-dressing) as well as in their motives for doing so. A small number can go on to identify as transsexual.

¹ Definitions adapted from *More Than a Phase* (Pobal, 2006), *For a Better Understanding of Sexual Orientation* (APA, 2008) and *Answers to Your Questions About Transgender Individuals and Gender Identity* (APA, 2006)

Gender Reassignment also called *transitioning*, is the process of changing the way someone's gender is lived publicly and can be a complex process. People who wish to transition often start by expressing their gender identity in situations where they feel safe. They typically work up to living full-time in a different gender, by making gradual changes to their gender expression. Connecting with other transgender people through peer support groups and transgender community organisations is also very helpful for people when they are going through the transition process. Transitioning typically involves changes in clothing and grooming, a name change, change of gender on identity documents, hormonal treatment, and surgery.

Coming Out is the term used by lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) people to describe their experience of discovery, self-acceptance, openness and honesty about their LGBT identity and their decision to disclose, i.e. to share this with others when and how they choose.

Sexual Orientation refers to an enduring pattern of emotional, romantic, and/or sexual attractions to men, women, or both sexes. Sexual orientation also refers to a person's sense of identity based on those attractions, related behaviours, and membership in a community of others who share those attractions. Three sexual orientations are commonly recognised – heterosexual, homosexual (gay and lesbian) and bisexual.

Homophobia refers to fear of or prejudice and discrimination against lesbian, gay and bisexual people. It is also the dislike of same-sex attraction and love or the hatred of people who have those feelings. The term was first used in the 1970s and is more associated with ignorance, prejudice and stereotyping than with the physiological reactions usually attributed to a 'phobia'. While homophobic comments or attitudes are often unintentional, they can cause hurt and offence to lesbian, gay and bisexual people.

Transphobia refers to fear of or prejudice and discrimination against people who are transgender or who are perceived to transgress norms of gender, gender identity or gender expression. While transphobic comments or attitudes are often unintentional, they can cause hurt and offence to transgender people.



The 'Supporting LGBT Lives' Study

The Supporting LGBT Lives section of this guide will increase volunteers' appreciation of the experiences and circumstances of LGBT people in Ireland as well as the range of LGBT-specific stresses that callers may be experiencing. The *Supporting LGBT Lives* study was commissioned by GLEN and BeLonG To Youth Service and was funded by the HSE's National Office for Suicide Prevention (NOSP). The research was carried out by the Children's Research Centre, Trinity College Dublin and the School of Education, University College Dublin. The report was launched by Mary Harney, Minister for Health in 2009.

The aim of the research was to identify and provide responses to the issue of suicide among the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender population in Ireland, with special emphasis on young people. The research also aimed to identify mental health risk and resilience factors among Ireland's LGBT population.

The online survey gathered information from 1,110 LGBT people (ages ranged from 14 to 73) and in-depth interviews were carried out with 40 LGBT people. It is the most comprehensive study of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people in Ireland to-date. The report gives a very good picture of what it is like to grow up and live in Ireland as an LGBT person. It gives a comprehensive insight into the challenges and barriers LGBT people face and describes what supports them in overcoming these barriers. The key findings are below.

Minority Stress

- > Most LGBT people never self-harm, attempt suicide and never have serious substance misuse or mental health problems such as anxiety or depression.
- > However, stigma, discrimination, harassment and inequality cause particular stresses for LGBT people (this is called minority stress) and minority stress places LGBT people at higher risk of developing mental health problems.
- > Being LGBT *per se* is not indicative of or correlated with having mental health problems.
- > The greater the support, inclusion and equality for LGBT people, the lesser the minority stress.

"I still had to deal with it in my head that, even though I had never dreamt of wedding dresses and getting married and having children and all the rest of it, just that I would be an outsider in society"

(Lesbian, Female, 54)

"Well everyday it's stressful, I have to go to work and it's not good, the way I feel, I feel I need to change the way I look and my family don't know about my situation as of yet. I just find it hard where I live, the area that I live in to try and hide something, to hide this, it's just difficult"

(Male-to-Female Trans, 30)

LGBT People's Experiences of Victimisation

- > 80% had been verbally abused because of their LGBT identity
- > 40% had been threatened with physical violence
- > 25% had been punched, kicked or beaten because of their LGBT identity
- > 25% of those who had ever worked had been called abusive names at work because they were LGBT
- > 15% had been verbally threatened and 17% physically threatened by work colleagues
- > 10% missed work because they were afraid of being hurt or felt threatened because of their LGBT identity

"I'm sure people knew I was gay you know, I did walk up through (rural village) and people would be calling faggot and stuff like that. It did kill me a lot hearing you know the words and stuff and I was afraid as well, I felt very alone inside and the drink was my best friend"

(Gay, Male, 24)

LGBT Experiences including 'Coming Out'

- > **12 years** = most common age to realise you are LGBT
- > **17 years** = most common age to start coming out to others (average 21)
- > **7 years** = the average number of years LGBT people conceal their identity from others before coming out
- > The period prior to coming out was particularly stressful because of fear of rejection and isolation
- > For young people this 7 year period coincides with puberty, school and a critical period of social, emotion and vocational development
- > There are 3 common LGBT-specific stresses: fear of rejection when considering coming out; negative school and work experiences; and experiences of harassment, victimisation and inequality in everyday life.

"My sexual identity was hidden even from myself because I did not have a language to describe my experience. It may even be that the lack of language and openness also protected me from direct discrimination in school as it was not something talked about. However the lack of knowledge and understanding did cause me a lot of wasted time and difficulties in the years after leaving school and I was lucky that this did not cause me too much suffering or pain."

(Gay Male, Aged 46)

"Coming out is probably one of the most extreme and difficult things you can do. Before you come out you have to deal with it all yourself and it took me six years to. And I couldn't be myself for those six years and it is, again, it's called in the closet because you are in the closet. No one can see you; they see this door because no one's ever opened up the closet to look inside."

(Gay, Male, 17)

"... (my mother) comes from a very conservative, very religious background and as a result she is very homophobic ... so like I have no doubt that she's transphobic as well because I have given hints to her... when I started exploring my identity, I probably became more open in the way I carried myself, my gestures and she saw that and she was very scared and then I told her... that basically my gender doesn't get my sex. My mother doesn't get my body yet and she was, she was very shocked at first. Then she tried to convince herself that it was just a phase and then she was trying to tell me like there are some women who are feeling masculine and they are fine with it and I'm, even again when I told her I may be going on to, like actually going to hormone therapy, she was like, "If you're doing that then you're not living here anymore."

(Female-to-Male Trans, 20)

LGBT School Experiences

- > 58% reported homophobic bullying in their schools
- > Over 50% had been called abusive names related to their LGBT identity by fellow students
- > 40% verbally threatened and 25% physically threatened by school peers
- > 34% reported homophobic comments by teachers
- > 20% missed or skipped school because they felt threatened or were afraid of getting hurt at school because they were LGBT
- > 8% were called homophobic names by teachers
- > 5% left school early because of homophobic bullying

"I lost a close friend to suicide earlier this year as he couldn't face coming out and the jeering he was getting for being suspected of being gay. Yet the school he was in did NOTHING in the way of policy afterwards so it could potentially and probably will be repeated. I was also sent to a counsellor in the hope it would "talk me out of being bisexual" and got a warning that if I dated girls in college or had gay friends my parents will not pay for my education"

(Bisexual, Female, 18)

"I left school because of the hurt and suffering I got in school, and the teachers didn't care, as I think it was a case of "well they call him gay and he probably is gay, so why should we step in, cos they aren't saying anything wrong" attitude towards gay people... even though I wasn't out at school. I was forced to leave at my junior cert, due to the abuse I got ... jumped on, called puff, queer etc."

(Gay, Male, 23)

LGBT Mental Health Risks

- > 27% had self-harmed and 4/5 of these did so more than once. 15.5 years was the average age of first self-harming. 40% of females and 20% of male respondents had self-harmed
- > 17.7% had attempted suicide once; almost 3/4 of whom saw this attempt as related to their LGBT identity. 17.5 years was the average age of first suicide attempt. 25% of females and 15% of males attempted suicide at least once
- > Over 50% of those aged 25 years and under had seriously thought about ending their lives
- > This indicates that a significant sub-group of young of LGBT young people in particular are at risk for suicidality

"... it was kind of like I had to come out because I was very, very depressed at the time and, you know, I had years of knots in my stomach and I hadn't discussed it with anyone and I couldn't even come to terms with it myself ... I mean I never slept any night during my teenage years ... I spent four or five years in that state."

(Gay, Male, 43)

"I've been suicidal many times... It's not because I'm a lesbian but because of how I've been treated in my life as a lesbian. School was terrible and then to get bullied badly in work was horrible."

(Lesbian, Female, 28)

LGBT Well-Being and Good Mental Health

- Minority stress exposes a significant percentage of LGBT people to suicidality. Given adequate support most LGBT people develop resilience to the stress caused by stigmatisation, harassment and discrimination, and live happy and satisfying lives
- 81% of participants in the study said they are now comfortable with their LGBT identity, and the majority have good self-esteem and are satisfied with their lives
- Over 2/3 have come out to all their immediate family and their friends
- Support of family (parents in particular) and friends as well as positive experiences in communities, schools or workplaces are critical for LGBT people's well-being and good mental health
- Mental health resilience (i.e. the ability to cope with minority stress) was related to:
 - Acceptance and support from family and friends
 - A positive turnabout or life event such as the transition out of secondary school
 - Support from LGBT community organisations and services
 - Developing positive coping strategies and good self-esteem
 - Positive school or work experiences

"I am happy to conclude by saying that I am now a very content, confident, well-adjusted gay man, fully out and very happy to be gay. I have grown and thrived with the love and support of my friends and two of my sisters ... being gay was never my problem but how people reacted to me being gay was certainly part of what made life very hard in the past"

(Gay, Male, 35)

"I am proud to be a lesbian but it took me a long time to accept my sexuality and it would have been easier to accept if society was a little more understanding"

(Lesbian, Female, 26)

LGBT Young People

- > Most young people know they are LGBT at age 12 and start coming out at age 17
- > The period between knowing you are LGBT and telling others can be particularly stressful for young people
- > Acceptance and support when coming out is critical to good mental health and well-being
- > Friends and family, but parents in particular, have a crucial role to play in supporting young LGBT people as they come out and this support acts as a protective buffer against stresses they may encounter
- > Schools have an important role to play in protecting and supporting young LGBT people. The research reveals that homophobic bullying is not being effectively addressed
- > Appropriate and accessible youth services, personal support services and family support services have the potential to provide vital supports to young people and their families
- > For a significant minority of LGBT people, the adolescent years are a time of particular vulnerability for depression, self-harm and suicidal behaviour
- > With appropriate support and protection from minority stress, the majority of LGBT people learn to cope with minority stress and report that they are happy, comfortable with their identity and satisfied with their lives

"So I told them both I was gay and my father straight away stood up and went over to me, pulled me off my seat, gave me hug and said, do you know what, that doesn't matter one bit, and he was great, and my mother was like, em, they still love me, d'you know, it doesn't matter"

(Lesbian, Female, 31)

"At the moment life is very good, you know I have no problem... I have the support at home, and do you know, I haven't had problems with family members or people disowning me or anything like that. I've always had the support at home to be me; it's never been a problem"

(Male-to-Female Trans, 37)

Good Practice Guidelines

The following good practice guidelines are provided to support Samaritans volunteers in providing a confidential, non-judgemental listening service to LGBT callers.

Be aware of LGBT issues and stresses

The *Supporting LGBT Lives* section of this guide will help volunteers appreciate the experiences and circumstances of LGBT people in Ireland as well as the range of LGBT-specific stresses that callers may be experiencing. The reason for an LGBT person calling the Samaritans may or may not be related to their LGBT identity. LGBT-specific issues that callers may be facing include:

- Questioning sexual orientation or gender identity
- Fear of coming out or unable/not wanting to come out
- Lack of acceptance or support from family and friends
- Homophobic or transphobic bullying or harassment in school, workplace or other environments
- Being exposed to negative messages about being LGBT including stigmatisation, prejudice and stereotyping
- Older LGBT people – lack of social support, isolation and fears about long-term placement (e.g. ethos of nursing home)
- Loss – loss of opportunities and experiences because of lack of rights and recognition, not coming out, bereavement or relationship break-up
- Relationship crisis – conflict or domestic violence
- Isolation and loneliness – no contact with LGBT community, living in non-urban area or absence of long-term relationship
- Hiding and secrecy – LGBT person who is in a heterosexual marriage or cross-dressing
- LGBT parents may be anxious about the level of support they will receive from family and friends, their community, schools and service providers. LGBT parents may also be anxious about the impact that openness about their sexual orientation or gender identity may have on their children or their access to or custody of their children
- Being exposed to harmful 'reparative' or 'conversion' therapy – a religious-based therapy that attempts to change a person's sexual orientation or gender identity but has been proven to be harmful to LGBT people's mental health

LGBT callers should be responded to in the same way as other callers and provided with the same confidential and non-judgemental listening response. The *Supporting LGBT Lives* study showed the important role support plays in preventing LGBT self-harm and suicidal behaviour. Samaritans volunteers can provide LGBT callers with enormous emotional support at times of crisis or need.

Don't assume all callers are heterosexual or not transgender

Any person who calls Samaritans may identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender or have a history of relationships with members of the same sex. Such callers may or may not have come out. By keeping an open mind and not making assumptions about callers' sexual orientation or gender identity, you are demonstrating to LGBT callers that they are welcome to disclose their sexual orientation or gender identity to you or to discuss issues related to being LGBT that may be relevant to their reasons for calling Samaritans.

A situation that may arise is that you think a caller is struggling to disclose their LGBT identity to you. In this instance, as with any sensitive matter, you can support them by reassuring them that all personal information disclosed is confidential and that you provide a non-judgemental service. If it is appropriate to the conversation you are having with the caller you could enquire about relationships both current and past. If someone is hinting at an LGBT issue, you could try asking something like:

"It sounds as if you are questioning your feelings/your orientation/your identity... has that been on your mind?"

For some callers, using language like 'sexual orientation', 'gay', 'transgender' and 'LGBT' may be too threatening. The above is an example of how you can hint at these without stating them explicitly.

Parents of LGBT children may also call Samaritans. For most parents whose son or daughter comes out as LGBT, they can accept and support their child and adapt to the new awareness of their child's LGBT identity. However, some parents may have a harder time coming to terms with their child's disclosure. They may express concerns about their child's well-being and feel a sense of loss of the assumed heterosexuality or gender of their child. They may be upset about a perceived loss of grandchildren and other aspects of what they imagined or hoped for their child's future. Most parents come to realise over time that despite the challenges LGBT people can face, most live lives that are as satisfying and fulfilling as their heterosexual and non-transgender brothers and sisters.

Respond supportively when people disclose they are LGBT

Coming out is an important time in LGBT people's lives and asking LGBT callers about their experience of coming out shows them that you understand that this is an important part of their lives. Coming out is potentially also a time of heightened mental health risk, particularly for younger LGBT people, so providing the caller with an opportunity to talk about coming

out may provide them with much needed support. Young LGBT people in particular may be questioning their sexual orientation or gender identity or seeking help in clarifying romantic feelings or feelings about their gender identity. Helping young people to feel safe and supported will facilitate their process of self-acceptance and coming out.

If it is appropriate to the conversation you are having with the caller, ways of asking a caller about coming out and their life experiences related to being LGBT include:

- > "Does anyone know you are lesbian/ gay/ bisexual/ transgender?"
- > "Have you come out to anyone in your family?"
- > "How have things been for you since you came out?"
- > "Who/what has helped you with coming out?"
- > "Are there lesbian/gay/bisexual/transgender people you know that you can talk to? Are they supportive?"
- > "Have you had any negative experiences since coming out?"

LGBT callers who are calling Samaritans for reasons unrelated to their LGBT identity may disclose their identity in the course of their conversation with you. Other callers may not have fully accepted their LGBT identity or may only be in the very initial stages of coming out and this should be dealt with in a sensitive manner. If a person tells you they may be or are lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender, respond in an affirmative and supportive way. Try to avoid the assumption that young people are going through a phase or are too young to make such a declaration.

Some LGBT people who call Samaritans may not want to come out and this should be respected. While you may assume that coming out would be the best thing for the person, this is not necessarily the case. Most people who are not out to some or all of the people in their life have very good personal reasons for this. For other callers, they may not be able to come out because they are married, they are part of a religious order or because they perceive it would be detrimental to their life in some way (e.g. homophobia/transphobia in certain work environments). Even though someone may make the decision not to come out, they may still need to talk about the challenges this decision presents from time to time.

Use LGBT-inclusive language and questions/statements

As any caller to Samaritans may identify as LGBT, it is important to avoid using language that assumes heterosexuality and gender identity with all callers. Using open language and questions is a very good way of demonstrating to callers that you are not assuming they are heterosexual or of a certain gender. When appropriate to a conversation you are having with a caller, use the terms lesbian, gay or bisexual instead of the term homosexual when talking to callers. The following are some examples of inclusive questions and statements:

EXAMPLES OF INCLUSIVE QUESTIONS/STATEMENTS	
Instead of:	Use:
Are you married?	Do you have a partner?
Do you have a girlfriend/boyfriend?	Are you in a relationship?
What is your husband/wife's name?	What is your partner's name?
You seem like a strong man/woman to me.	You seem like a strong person to me.

Avoid referring to a caller's LGBT identity as their 'preference' or their 'lifestyle'. Being lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender is not a preference - it is one's sexual orientation or one's gender identity. It is more helpful for LGBT callers if you use the words orientation or identity when referring to their LGBT identity. For some volunteers these words may feel too formal to use. Ways of talking about a caller's sexual orientation or gender identity without using these terms are:

"What's it been like for you since you started expressing yourself openly?"

"It sounds like it's been difficult for you to be yourself"



Appendix

The following is a list of LGBT services and organisations in Ireland. These organisations can provide you with further information on LGBT people and may be available to provide training to local branches. A list of further reading is also included.

LGBT Centres and Groups

Republic of Ireland		
Dundalk Outcomers	042-9329816	www.outcomers.org
Gay Men's Health Service	01-8734952	gmpoutreach@eircom.net
L.inC (Lesbians in Cork)	021-4808600	www.linc.ie
The Other Place (Cork)	021-4278470	www.theotherplacecork.com
Outhouse Community Centre Dublin	01-8734932	www.outhouse.ie
Outwest Ireland	087-9725586	www.outwestireland.ie
Rainbow Support Service Midwest	061-310101	www.rainbowsupportservices.org
South Waterford	086-2147633	www.southgroup.wetpaint.com
Transgender Equality Network Ireland (TENI)	01-6334687 085147 7166	www.teni.ie
Northern Ireland		
Lesbian Advocacy Services Initiative (LASI)	(028) 27641463	www.lasionline.org
Rainbow Project Belfast	(028) 9031 9030	www.rainbow-project.org
Rainbow Project Derry	(028) 7128 3030	www.rainbow-project.org

Support for Young LGBT People

BeLonG To Youth Service	01-6706223	info@belongto.org
Gay & Lesbian Youth Northern Ireland (GLYNI)	07707 216921	www.glyni.org.uk

For a full list of LGBT youth supports see www.belongto.org

Support for Parents of LGBT People

LOOK (Parent Support)	087-2537699	www.lovingouroutkids.org
Parent Support in Cork	021-4304884	info@gayprojectcork.com

Social, sports and cultural activities

Check Gay Community News, the monthly LGBT magazine, at www.gcn.ie for a detailed list of LGBT social, cultural and sporting groups and organisations and online forums.

Further Reading

Sexual Orientation	The booklet <i>For a Better Understanding of Sexual Orientation & Homosexuality</i> was produced by the American Psychological Association and is available on their website at: www.apa.org/topics/sexuality/orientation.pdf
Gender Identity	The American Psychological Association have also produced an excellent booklet called ' <i>Answers to Your Questions About Transgender Individuals and Gender Identity</i> ' and this is available on their website at: www.apa.org/topics/sexuality/transgender.pdf
LGBT Mental Health	The <i>Supporting LGBT Lives</i> report was written by Dr Paula Mayock, Dr Audrey Bryan, Nicola Carr and Karl Kitching and it is available on the GLEN website on: www.glen.ie
Parents of LGBT People	LOOK (Loving Our Out Kids) have been providing support to parents of LGBT people since 1980 and there is very useful information on their website: www.lovingouroutkids.ie
LGBT Young People	Various booklets and reports on LGBT young people have been produced by BeLonG To Youth Service and are available at: www.belongto.org

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