



# LGBT Mental Health and Aging Support Guide



Finding ways to grow and be healthy as you age is important. The journey of aging brings with it new stressors and opportunities, including some that are unique to the LGBT community.

Being LGBT does not automatically mean you will experience mental health challenges. However, as an LGBT elder, there are certain stressors you may face from people who do not accept your sexual orientation or gender identity. These may include: stigma and discrimination; homophobia/biphobia/transphobia; rejecting behaviors from your friends, family, or religious community; and bullying, harassment, hate speech, or violence. These experiences can be extremely traumatic and hurtful, and stressors like these can affect your mental health and wellbeing.

The stressors you experience are also affected by the intersection of other parts of your identity, such as your race/ethnicity, social class, culture, religion, age, disability, and more. Whatever your experience, you are not alone, and whatever mental health challenge you're facing, recovery is possible.

Aging is a process, and feeling older can start at different times in people's lives. Even as early as age 50 you may begin to notice changes in your body and mind, or your personal and professional opportunities.

There are several life changes that tend to be part of aging. You may face health challenges, retire or lessen your workload, need more assistance in daily tasks, or need full-time care. Wherever you are on this journey, there are resources that can help you be as healthy as possible.

Aging can bring new possibilities. Many people find that leaving the workforce affords them more freedom to come out, or more fully express their gender or sexual orientation without fear of workplace discrimination. People may also happily find that they have more free time to pursue hobbies, volunteer in their communities, travel, or be with friends and family.

Leaving the workforce can also bring financial stressors. Perhaps you're challenged by living on a fixed income for the first time, or you'd like to retire but find that you need to continue working. Financial stressors can be even more common in the LGBT community where rates of poverty are higher, especially among women and transgender people.<sup>1</sup> Some people find that without the structure of work they get bored, lonely, isolated or depressed.

**You may hear or use other language when referring to the LGBT community, and we acknowledge that there are a multitude of ways to describe sexual orientation and gender identity. Throughout this document, we use "LGBT" because it is the most recognized term among older adults.**

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.law.ucla.edu/williamsinstitute/pdf/LGBPovertyReport.pdf>;  
<http://williamsinstitute.law.ucla.edu/headlines/beyond-stereotypes-poverty-in-the-lgbt-community/>

Changes to your physical health can also necessitate more interactions with numerous healthcare providers. For LGBT people, this can mean answering a lot of questions about your personal life and being presented with the challenge of coming out – again and again. Unfortunately, coming out can bring rejection or harsh treatment from healthcare providers<sup>2</sup> or feeling stuck with caregivers who don't understand who you are as an LGBT person.

## The rewards and stressors of being a caregiver

Caregiving can be a special concern for LGBT people. We are twice as likely as our heterosexual counterparts to live alone, and three to four times less likely to have children to support us. We are also more likely to be the caregivers for our own parents.<sup>3</sup>

For many of us, that means we are experienced caregivers who end up not only caring for our biological families, but also for our families of choice. Without planning and self-care, this can lead to caregiver exhaustion and burnout.

While it can become overwhelming, the rewards of caregiving can also fuel a sense of purpose. Paying attention to your own needs and reaching out for support when needed can make a significant difference in the caregiving experience.

For more information and resources about caregiving and the LGBT community, visit SAGE at: [www.sageusa.org/newsevents/news.cfm?ID=57](http://www.sageusa.org/newsevents/news.cfm?ID=57)

The SAGE LGBT Elder Hotline is ready to take your calls at **1-888-234-SAGE**.

<sup>2</sup> [https://www.lambdalegal.org/sites/default/files/publications/downloads/whcic-report\\_when-health-care-isnt-caring.pdf](https://www.lambdalegal.org/sites/default/files/publications/downloads/whcic-report_when-health-care-isnt-caring.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.asaging.org/blog/lgbt-individuals-caregivers-aging-parents-and-partners>

## Recognizing acts of rejection in our lives

Many LGBT elders grew up in a time when family, friends, or faith groups rejected them because of their sexual orientation or gender identity. Although our culture is changing, these attitudes still exist today, and can sometimes create an unwelcoming environment within healthcare centers for older adults.

Most people have an automatic, physiological response to discrimination, such as increased levels of anxiety, high levels of wariness/watchfulness, sweating, and/or increased heart rate. Rejection can make you feel angry, ashamed, afraid, or lead to a desire to hide and stay away from other people.

Sometimes, you aren't even aware of the anxiety and depression that can be a natural result of experiencing rejection; however, it can help to acknowledge the experiences you have had, and recognize how that makes you feel.

## Understanding the links between depression and pain

Studies have shown that LGBT adults experience higher rates of alcohol abuse, drug abuse, smoking, suicide, and depression, often due to high levels of stress caused by systemic discrimination.<sup>4</sup> For many older adults, feelings of depression or anxiety can express themselves through their bodies,<sup>5</sup> taking the form of increased body pain, headaches, and fatigue.

If you're experiencing increased pain and fatigue, it's important to not just attribute it to normal aging. Talk with healthcare and mental health professionals you trust about the full picture of your experience, and explore potential physical and emotional causes and treatments.

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<sup>4</sup> <http://www.sageusa.org/files/lgbt%20older%20adults%20and%20health%20disparities.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2852580/>

## Suicide in older LGBT adults

Depression doesn't have to be a part of aging, and untreated depression can increase risk of suicide. Help is available and there is support if you are having thoughts of suicide.

If you are feeling suicidal (or if you are concerned about someone), there is help available right now. A trained counselor is ready to talk to you and provide help.

**Call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-8255.** This a free and confidential 24-hour hotline. (Press 1 for a dedicated line for Veterans and their families. Para espanol, oprima 2.)

The National Suicide Prevention Lifeline has TTY capability via one of our national call centers, which can be accessed by calling **1-800-799-4TTY (4889)**.

If emergency medical care is needed, call **9-1-1** or go to the emergency room of the nearest hospital.

## **If you're worried about someone else:**

The situation is an emergency and immediate action is needed if any of these signs are present:

- in the act of hurting or killing him or herself, has a weapon or other lethal means
- threatening to hurt or kill him or herself
- looking for ways to hurt or kill him or herself, talking about a plan to do so
- talking about death or suicide and is acting anxious or agitated
- talking about death or suicide and is intoxicated or “high” on drugs

## **If you answer YES to ANY of the above:**

- Call 911 or the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline: 1-800-273-8255
- Don't leave the person alone.
- Remove all lethal means (weapons, medications, etc.) from the vicinity
- Take the person to a nearby Emergency Room or walk-in psychiatric crisis clinic
- Do not put yourself in danger; if you are concerned about your own safety, call 911

## **If you answer NO to ALL of the above:**

Don't be afraid to reach out to the person you care about and create a safe space for them to talk about what they're going through. Need help figuring out what to say? Visit the Know the Signs website to learn more: [www.SuicidelsPreventable.org](http://www.SuicidelsPreventable.org)

## Getting the right support

The first step in getting the help you need is finding healthcare professionals for your physical and mental health that will be knowledgeable and supportive. Sometimes, it takes several attempts at help-seeking to find the right fit. For example, if you are transgender, finding a provider who is competent in transgender healthcare is an important step toward getting good medical care. To maximize your chances of finding the right doctor or therapist, try some of the following strategies and resources:

- Ask other LGBT people you know for a referral to someone they trust.
- Check to see if your healthcare network has an option for searching provider profiles for special expertise. For example, Kaiser allows users to search doctors' profiles for those that support LGBT patients.
- Try searching **www.gaylesta.org** for a therapist who has registered as a provider for LGBT+ people.
- Call **211**, or search the **211.org** website for resources, groups, doctors, or therapists that serve the LGBT community.
- Get referrals from a local LGBT Group. Not sure where to start? Centerlink can help you find a local center: **www.lgbtcenters.org**



## Know your rights

Knowledge and support is empowering. Every Area Agency on Aging is required to have a plan on how to serve LGBT elders and California law (SB-1749) requires that all LGBT senior providers must have special, regular training as a condition of licensure. If you experience discrimination in a care facility, contact the Ombudsman's office for your county. For more information on the legal rights for both patients and caregivers, check out these resources:

[www.nclrights.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/04/Publications\\_Navigating-System.pdf](http://www.nclrights.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/04/Publications_Navigating-System.pdf)

<http://lgbtagingcenter.org>

[www.caregiver.org/legal-issues-lgbt-caregivers](http://www.caregiver.org/legal-issues-lgbt-caregivers)

[www.nclrights.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/07/Transgender\\_Family\\_Law\\_CA.pdf](http://www.nclrights.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/07/Transgender_Family_Law_CA.pdf)



## Five actions you can take to live well

**Connect with others.** Lack of social relationships can have as much impact on physical health as blood pressure, or even smoking.<sup>6</sup> Find an inclusive social or faith-based group where you feel welcome and safe and start connecting with others.

Not sure where to start? Find a local LGBT center in your area at [www.lgbtcenters.org](http://www.lgbtcenters.org). If you have a phone, you can connect with Senior Center Without Walls at **1-877-797-7299**; learn more at [www.seniorcenterwithoutwalls.org](http://www.seniorcenterwithoutwalls.org)

**Move your body.** Yes, it can be hard to get started – especially if you’re ill, depressed, or have physical limitations. But the benefits of exercise on mental health can be as powerful as medication.<sup>7</sup> Talk to your doctor about what might work best for your body. It doesn’t have to be intense. Find a walking group, try gentle stretching or yoga, do deep breathing exercises, or download one of the new apps that reminds you to do 1-minute exercises throughout the day. Bonus points if you get a buddy to join you – you’ll be working on connecting with others while you move!

**Ask for help.** There are programs available to help you stay in your home as you age, improve safety, deliver meals, and more. Reach out and ask for support, not only for physical and mental health, but for maintaining independence and quality of life. Start by calling **211** or searching **211.org**

**Help someone else.** A 20-year study found that volunteering is associated with lower rates of depression and increased well-being.<sup>8</sup> Find out how you can get involved in your community, helping out friends or family members, or find a cause you care about at [www.volunteermatch.org](http://www.volunteermatch.org)

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<sup>6</sup> <http://www.asaging.org/blog/what-social-relationships-can-do-health>

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2014/03/for-depression-prescribing-exercise-before-medication/284587/>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/the-empathy-gap/201308/the-caring-cure-can-helping-others-help-yourself>

**Tell your story.** Reflecting on your own life and sharing your story with others can have a positive impact on your own mental health, and on the others who hear your story. Share your story at the SAGE Story project ([www.sageusa.org/programs/sagestory-share.cfm](http://www.sageusa.org/programs/sagestory-share.cfm)), a national digital storytelling program for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender older adults, or attend a Story Corps event (<https://storycorps.org>) near you.

Each Mind Matters, California's Mental Health Movement, highlights the stories of people like you across California who have faced mental health challenges to start an open dialogue about mental health in our community. Watch the stories of others, and share your own at [www.eachmindmatters.org/get-involved/share-your-story](http://www.eachmindmatters.org/get-involved/share-your-story)



## Managing your legal affairs

Aging LGBT adults face many unique legal issues that can add to stress, challenge independence, and negatively impact emotional wellbeing. These issues may include:

- **Financial Security:** Savings, social security, and pensions make up the bulk of economic security for retirees. Laws relating to these programs for legally married couples may not be available to LGBT seniors. Being diligent in planning for retirement security is very important. Finding an experienced professional financial advisor may be beneficial.
- **Long-Term Healthcare:** Planning, finding, accessing and paying for long-term healthcare needs is another important step in preparing for the future. Setting up an advance directive for decision-making, setting aside funds to pay for expected and unexpected healthcare needs, and finding and accessing care where you feel supported and comfortable are all good steps to take.
- **Tax Treatment:** Same-sex couples frequently pay higher taxes through separate returns, property taxes, and estate and inheritance taxes. In addition, state and federal laws may differ. Working with a tax professional and/or lawyer can be very beneficial to help navigate these laws and issues as they apply to your specific situation.
- **Other Legal Considerations:** Estate planning and drawing up important legal documents can relieve a great deal of uncertainty about the future, and can ensure that your partner or chosen family is recognized and that your wishes are honored. Consider working with a lawyer to draw up a will, living trust, or make decisions about power of attorney.

**Find help and resources to address these issues and more at:**

[www.lgbtagingcenter.org/resources/resources.cfm?s=18](http://www.lgbtagingcenter.org/resources/resources.cfm?s=18)

[www.sageusa.org/issues/legal.cfm](http://www.sageusa.org/issues/legal.cfm)

National Center for Lesbian Rights' legal helpline at 800-528-6257





## General Resources

### **211: Get Connected. Get Answers.**

Call 211  
[www.211.org](http://www.211.org)

### **Institute on Aging**

Friendship Line: 1-800-971-0016  
[www.ioaging.org](http://www.ioaging.org)

### **SAGE USA**

[www.sageusa.org](http://www.sageusa.org)

### **Gaylesta**

[www.gaylesta.org](http://www.gaylesta.org)

### **CenterLink: The Community of LGBT Centers**

[www.lgbtcenters.org](http://www.lgbtcenters.org)

### **Senior Center Without Walls**

[www.seniorcenterwithoutwalls.org](http://www.seniorcenterwithoutwalls.org)

### **National Resource Center on LGBT Aging**

[www.lgbtagingcenter.org](http://www.lgbtagingcenter.org)

## Transgender Healthcare

### **Forge**

[www.forge-forward.org](http://www.forge-forward.org)

### **American Civil Liberties Union - Transgender People and Health Care**

[www.aclu.org/issues/lgbt-rights/transgender-rights/transgender-people-and-health-care](http://www.aclu.org/issues/lgbt-rights/transgender-rights/transgender-people-and-health-care)

### **National Center for Transgender Equality - Transgender Healthcare Rights**

[www.transequality.org/know-your-rights/healthcare](http://www.transequality.org/know-your-rights/healthcare)

## Legal Rights

### **Navigating the System: A Know-Your-Rights Guide for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Elders in California**

[www.nclrights.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/04/Publications\\_Navigating-System.pdf](http://www.nclrights.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/04/Publications_Navigating-System.pdf)

### **Family Caregiver Alliance - Legal Issues for LGBT Caregivers**

[www.caregiver.org/legal-issues-lgbt-caregivers](http://www.caregiver.org/legal-issues-lgbt-caregivers)

### **California Transgender Family Law - A Fact Sheet for Transgender Spouses, Partners, Parents, and Youth**

[www.nclrights.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/07/Transgender\\_Family\\_Law\\_CA.pdf](http://www.nclrights.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/07/Transgender_Family_Law_CA.pdf)

## Substance Abuse

### **National Resource Center on LGBT Aging - What to Do When Addiction Has Become a Coping Mechanism**

[www.lgbtagingcenter.org/resources/resource.cfm?r=824](http://www.lgbtagingcenter.org/resources/resource.cfm?r=824)

## Get Involved/Share Your Story

### **Volunteer Match**

[www.volunteermatch.org](http://www.volunteermatch.org)

### **Story Corps**

[www.storycorps.org](http://www.storycorps.org)

### **Each Mind Matters**

[www.eachmindmatters.org/get-involved/share-your-story](http://www.eachmindmatters.org/get-involved/share-your-story)

