

Connectedness And Acceptance: Improving Mental Health Among LGBTQ Youths

(NAPSA)—As a young boy, James knew that meeting with his therapist should not be making his depression worse. His therapist used conversion therapy—a practice meant to change an individual's sexual orientation or gender identity. These sessions only made him feel shameful and isolated. James had known he was gay since he was very young. But because he wanted to be accepted by his family and friends who were not supportive of a gay identity, he continued with conversion therapy. Unfortunately, denying a piece of his identity was harmful to his mental health.

Now, as an adult, James is a therapist who helps youths who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and/or questioning their sexual orientation or gender identity (LGBTQ youths) with their mental health and well-being.

LGBTQ youths are more likely to suffer from mistreatment and discrimination, compared to their counterparts who are heterosexual and cisgender (in other words, not transgender). At school, LGBTQ youths are more often the target of bullying and harassment than other students. They are at higher risk for anxiety, depression, suicidal ideation and attempt, and mental health problems. However, LGBTQ youths do not struggle with mental health issues because of their identities. They are put at risk for mental health issues because of how people who are unaccepting of LGBTQ identities, which may include family members and peers, treat them.

In an effort to eliminate stressors and improve LGBTQ youths' health, the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), a federal government agency focused on mental health and well-being, has recommended against health professionals using conversion therapy. Rather than providing the support that LGBTQ youths need, according to SAMHSA, "conversion therapy perpetuates outdated gender roles and negative stereotypes that being a sexual or gender minority or identifying as LGBTQ is an abnormal aspect of human development. Most importantly, it may put young people at risk of serious harm."

When LGBTQ youths are rejected by their family or peers, it negatively impacts their well-being. Therefore, rejected youths need adults who are supportive, including health care profession-



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Mental health experts say LGBTQ youths need support from the adults in their lives.

als. As a therapist for LGBTQ people, James can give his patients what he was not given as a young boy: an adult who accepts them, regardless of identity.

SAMHSA offers helpful advice to mental health professionals like James, as well as to parents, teachers and any other adults committed to serving youths, in order to help make the lives of LGBTQ youths healthy and successful. Researchers have discovered that "connectedness" can help promote healthy development in youths. "Connectedness" is just what it sounds like; feeling connected and supported by important adults and institutions, like schools, leads to well-being.

Here are some important ways that adults can help LGBTQ youths get the "connectedness" they need:

- Parents and family members can make sure to express affection for LGBTQ children or adolescents, showing them that they are accepted regardless of identity.

- Talk and listen respectfully, to understand a child's experiences.

- Stand up for a child or adolescent if he or she is hurt or mistreated or experiences discrimination. Knowing that a parent or caring adult is committed to ensuring that an LGBTQ youth is safe, and providing an open and accepting place, is a powerful support.

- Teachers and other educators can encourage all students and staff to stop any bullying or harassment and make schools a welcoming place for all students.

These simple actions can make a life-changing difference for LGBTQ youths. Learn more by reading SAMHSA's report, entitled "Ending Conversion Therapy: Supporting and Affirming LGBTQ Youth," available for free at <http://store.samhsa.gov/product/SM-A15-4928>.