



SUBSTANCE ABUSE AMONG LGBTI YOUTH

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Higher rates of substance abuse have been linked to some of the psycho-social effects of being a sexual minority, particularly in MSM in North American studies. Further, other causes that drive vulnerability to substance abuse including family dislocation and youth homelessness happen to LGBTI people at disproportionate levels to the rest of the population². Research shows that, relative to their heterosexual counterparts, gay men and lesbian women are more likely to suffer from mental health issues including depression risks and abusing substances as a tool to address societal and personal pressures, stresses and victimization placed upon them by a heterosexist and homophobic society. This abuse potentially further exacerbates other mental conditions like anxiety or depression. In this way depression and other associated illnesses can be a cause and consequence of substance abuse³

A review of studies conducted around methamphetamine use (akin to South Africa's "Tik") reports a US study conducted on LGBTI youth that found such use to be correlated with suicidal thoughts, if not explicitly attempts. Another Canadian study of street and LGBT youths found use to be associated with higher levels of mental effects like hallucinations and positive reports of Hepatitis C⁴

Gender DynamiX reported that, in line with international literature, health risk behaviors suggest high levels of substance abuse among transgender and gender non-conforming people as a means of handling social stigma, social exclusion and transphobia⁵.

Research conducted on levels of Empowerment of LGBTI people in the Western Cape found that 88% of respondents used alcohol to varying degrees of severity with 5% of respondents identifying as "alcohol abusers" or "alcoholics". 48% of respondents smoked cigarettes and 24% of participants admitted to using recreational drugs, with 8% of participants identifying as "drug abusers" or as "being dependent on drugs". 25% of 25-40 years olds used drugs as compared to only 17% in the 40+ age group. Substance abuse is a particular scourge of youth in the Western Cape generally with 25% of people in drug treatment centres being less than 20 years old. Considering how this report found drug, alcohol and cigarette use being positively related to levels of depression, and with drug and alcohol use particularly being correlated with low self-esteem, this abuse could lead to profound secondary consequences⁶.

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² Comprehensive Clinical Care for Men who have Sex with Men

³ Factors Affecting Vulnerability to Depression Among Gay Men and Lesbian Women in Gauteng, South Africa

⁴ Health Outcomes Associated with Methamphetamine Use Among Young People: A Systematic Review

⁵ Sexual and Reproductive Health for Transgender & Gender Non-Conforming People: Guidelines for Healthcare Workers in Primary Care

⁶ Overall Research Findings on Levels of Empowerment Among LGBT People in the Western Cape, South Africa

Studies in South Africa have frequently linked substance abuse to risky sexual behaviour. Lane et al, (2008) found that the link in their study wasn't closely linked to substances and therefore risky sex but rather to substance making coercive sex more likely (and therefore less safe). The way that alcohol and other substances exacerbate existing power structures and vulnerabilities in relationships creates risk⁷. LGBTI youth are more likely to experience isolation and societal exclusions which in turn, reinforces issues with mental illness and substance abuse. A 2004 study by OUT, Tshwane found strong correlations between suicide ideation, fear or experiences of victimisation, and alcohol abuse. They also found high rates of alcohol and drug abuse among young LGBTI people⁸.

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The link between mental illnesses like depression, and substance abuse is well established. In the South African context, there is evidence to suggest that LGBTI people have above average levels of mental illness and anxiety.¹⁰ This is significant in and of itself but also because of the clear links between depression, anxiety and other mental illness with substance abuse. It is particularly a problem because LGBTI people are less likely to seek help – either related to their mental health generally or their substance abuse problem – because of a fear of victimization or non-affirming service.

Furthermore, while strong and affirming communities play a role in mitigating mental health problems and substance abuse problems, LGBTI people often lack this affirming community structure. In this way, LGBTI people's minority status is a driver of depression and mental health issues, a driver of the other causes of substance abuse and furthermore, makes accessing help for any of these issues more difficult.

Substance abuse remains a problem in schools, but with most Life Orientation teachers (who would be responsible for discussions around substance abuse) not having any material in their curriculum relating to LGBTI people or sexual minorities, it is doubtful that there is a safe space for LGBTI people to discuss issues around substance abuse.¹¹ Violent bullying remains a problem in schools across South Africa, with homophobic bullying (in all its forms) being rife. This occurs in a context where many teachers are themselves homophobic or transphobic and where the Department of Education has only released real guidelines on the issue in 2016. Here again, the environment serves to push learners toward substance abuse and places barriers in their path to seeking health or information.

Government's Response to LGBT and Substance Abuse

From our research, we were not able to find any instances at local, provincial or national level where government explicitly makes the connections between substance abuse issues and LGBTI

⁷ Alcohol and Sexual Risk Behavior Among Men Who Have Sex with Men in South African Township Communities

⁸ Out of the Box: Queer Youth in South Africa Today

⁹ Alcohol and Sexual Risk Behavior Among Men Who Have Sex with Men in South African Township Communities

¹⁰ Factors Affecting Vulnerability to Depression Among Gay Men and Lesbian Women in Gauteng, South Africa.

¹¹ Out of the box: Queer Youth in South Africa today.

people. However, given government's usual deficient approach to including LGBTI issues and people, this is unsurprising. Government. does make the links between LGBTI people and high prevalence or risk of mental illness or of contracting HIV¹². Separately, government also makes connections between substance abuse and mental illness or HIV/AIDS¹³. However, they never make the connecting link of considering substance abuse with regards to LGBTI people.

By association and extension, LGBTI people are included in government's understanding around substance abuse. However the fact that they are not expressly included (and not mentioned as a specifically at risk group as research suggests) means that it is unlikely that LGBTI people are adequately included in general responses to substance abuse in South Africa. Furthermore, it is unlikely that there will be an awareness of the special challenges faced by this diverse group and the barriers to accessing assistance.

¹² National Strategic Plan for HIV, STIS and TB; City of Cape Town Policy Position on Alcohol and Drugs and Alcohol and Other Drug Harm Minimisation and Mitigation Strategy 2011-2014; Western Cape Youth Development Strategy 2014

¹³ <https://www.westerncape.gov.za/substance-abuse>