

LGBTQ+ Youth

How to Help Yourself or a Friend

Expert Review by Lindsay Gerber, PsyD, Child Mind Institute
Co-authored by Vincent Pompei Ed.D. and Ellen Kahn, Human Rights Campaign



HUMAN
RIGHTS
CAMPAIGN
FOUNDATION™

Mental health is an important part of our overall health and well-being. Feeling sad, alone, worried, or scared is very likely a sign that our mental health is in need of care, just like having a cough or a bruise that won't heal is a sign of needing care.

It is often difficult to talk about our feelings or needs for support but talking about mental health symptoms and getting help are the first steps in taking care of our mental health. When we feel happy, safe, and supported, we are more likely to succeed in school, maintain meaningful relationships and reach our hopes and dreams.

Young people of all backgrounds experience mental health challenges at times, for many different reasons —such as peer pressure, difficulty with schoolwork, or disconnection from family, to name a few. Research reveals LGBTQ+ youth to be at a higher risk for mental health disorders than their non-LGBTQ+ peers and to face additional, unique stressors that increase psychological distress. For example, LGBTQ+ youth may fear coming out or being outed to their parents or other family members. Many LGBTQ+ youth have reportedly experienced rejection or been mistreated when they have come out. Additionally, LGBTQ+ youth may be bullied and harassed by classmates, neighbors, and even educators and may struggle to feel accepted in their

community. Experiences of discrimination can lead to feeling alone, worried, angry, sad or scared, and it is crucial that we get help when we need it.

It is important to remember that being LGBTQ+ is not a mental health disorder. Rather, it is the invalidation and negative reactions towards one's LGBTQ+ identity that can lead to emotional distress and cause mental health concerns. It is also important to remember that you are not alone, and there are lots of resources awaiting you when you take the first step to get help.

HELPFUL TIPS FOR MANAGING LGBTQ+ SPECIFIC DISTRESS AND/OR CHALLENGES

- 1. Establish a mindfulness practice:** Mindfulness allows us to focus on the present moment, nonjudgmentally, sit with challenging emotions, and improve attentional control. It has been proven to increase our sense of feeling grounded, reduce emotional suffering, enhance our experience of joy, and improve our physical health. [Click here](#) to learn more about mindfulness.
- 2. Use validation:** Validation entails communicating, either to ourselves or another person, that our/ their thoughts, feelings, and experiences are real and understandable. Validation helps to lower our

Join our inclusive online community



Share your health story to inspire others,
email projecturok@childmind.org

emotional intensity, allowing us to feel more in control and make more effective choices. Some examples of validating statements are:

- It makes sense that I am feeling sad, confused, and worried given what is going on in the world right now.
- I am doing the best I can in this moment.

- 3. Practice self-care with what's available:** Cope with distress by listening to music, eating your favorite meal or snack, watching a funny show or movie, working out, taking a walk, drawing or painting, or spending time with a supportive friend or family member. Remember to avoid mood-altering drugs and alcohol.
- 4. Create a strong support system:** Make a list of the people and/or organizations you can turn to when in distress. Knowing who to call or text when you need help can make it easier to reach out. There are free and confidential online support services for LGBTQ+ youth to connect with peers, including Trevor Space and Q-Chat, that are available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.
- 5. Seek help:** If your distress gets to a level that feels difficult to manage and/or begins to interfere with your ability to complete tasks of daily living (e.g. eating, showering, completing school/work commitments, etc.), it's important to seek professional help. Reach out to a supportive adult or community services that can help connect you with a mental health professional.

HOW TO ENCOURAGE A FRIEND TO GET HELP AND SUPPORT THEM

- 1. Provide support:** Ask your friend how they are feeling, show them you understand their feelings, and offer support. Listen without judgment and try to avoid problem-solving, unless they ask for that kind of help.
- 2. Educate yourself and become an LGBTQ+ ally:** Learn more about the LGBTQ+ population to avoid accidental invalidation. Click here for a detailed guide

on how to best support an LGBTQ+ peer or loved one: [A Guide to Being an Ally to Transgender and Non-binary Youth](#); [The Trevor Project](#).

- 3. Help find community and support:** Assist your friend and/or loved one in locating LGBTQ+ affirming communities and support networks either online or within their local community.
- 4. If a friend is struggling,** encourage them to talk to their parents or another trusted adult to get connected to professional help, and express confidence that therapy and/or medication can make a big difference.

THE IMPORTANCE OF MENTAL HEALTH TREATMENT

LGBTQ+ individuals commonly report experiencing depression (including suicidality), anxiety, and/or overall distress associated with managing anti-LGBTQ+ stigma and discrimination. The treatment for these disorders can include therapy, medication, or a combination of both.

Therapy

Just as there are different treatments for medical conditions — and not always a “one size fits all” approach to curing an illness — there are also different therapeutic approaches. Depending on your specific mental health symptoms and other personal considerations, a therapist can identify how to best meet your needs and help you feel better. A few examples of therapeutic approaches that LGBTQ+ youth report to be effective include:

- 1. Affirmative Therapy** is an approach to treatment that values the importance of self-acceptance and validates one's experience as an LGBTQ+ individual. Affirmative treatment also promotes advocacy, helping individuals to feel more connected and in control.
- 2. Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT)** is a skills-focused treatment that helps to change thinking and behavior patterns that contribute to depression and anxiety.

Join our inclusive online community

    @projecturok

Share your health story to inspire others,
email projecturok@childmind.org

3. **Family Therapy** can help family members gain a more comprehensive understanding of one another and learn how to effectively communicate, validate, and provide support to one another.
4. **Dialectical behavioral therapy (DBT)** is an effective treatment for youth and adults who have difficulty managing extreme emotions, particularly when these emotions are linked to self-harm and suicidal ideation.

Medication

Many LGBTQ+ youth report symptoms of depression and anxiety. Antidepressants increase the supply of certain neurotransmitters whose absence is linked to depression. These medicines, including selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs), are also effective in reducing anxiety. Medications are a safe treatment method when properly managed by a psychiatrist and are best when used in conjunction with therapy.

HOW TO FIND AN LGBTQ+ AFFIRMING THERAPIST

LGBTQ+ youth will benefit from working with a therapist (counselor, psychologist, social worker) who has experience working with LGBTQ+ clients and is committed to affirming and supporting LGBTQ+ individuals. Utilize your support system (parents, peers, caring adults) to assist you in finding the right therapist for you; there may be barriers based on whether you have insurance, your ability to pay on your own, and/or where you live. LGBTQ+ youth in more rural areas may benefit from treatment via telehealth with a professional who is based in a larger city and has experience in working with LGBTQ+ people. For additional support, contact your nearest LGBTQ Community Center for guidance on local LGBTQ-affirming support services.

You can also locate local therapists at [Psychology Today](#) or through your family's insurance provider. [WebMD](#) also provides a helpful guide on how to start your search and what to look for.

WHAT TO DO IF YOU ARE IN CRISIS

- Call 911 immediately if you're concerned that you or a friend are unsafe, may be in danger of self-harm, or may be suicidal or overdosing. Tell responders as many details as possible so they can be prepared when they arrive.
- Contact the Trevor Lifeline, a Free, 24-hour hotline for LGBTQ youth: 1-866-488-7386
- Additional free, 24-hour, anonymous hotlines include:
 - ▶ Crisis Text Line: text UROK to 741741
 - ▶ National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-8255

EXPERT INFORMATION

- Child Mind Institute
- Human Rights Campaign
- The Trevor Project
- PFLAG
- National Alliance for Mental Health (NAMI)
- WebMD

COMMUNITIES

- Project UROK
- Born This Way Foundation
- To Write Love On Her Arms
- The Mighty

Join our inclusive online community

    @projecturok

Share your health story to inspire others, email projecturok@childmind.org