

## **Developing resilience amongst LGBT young people Jan Bridget, Gay and Lesbian Youth in Calderdale**

**LGBT young people are significantly more likely to attempt suicide, self-harm, experience depression, anxiety, phobias, and misuse substances than heterosexual young people. How can we reduce this risk and help them develop resilience? The workshop will identify why this group are vulnerable, what the risk factors are, how to reduce vulnerability and begin to develop resilience.**

### **1. VULNERABLE GROUP**

1.1 Like other young people who belong to a minority/disadvantaged group: internalise a stigmatised identity

1.2 Also have to cope with external discrimination

1.3 Both internal and external oppression makes minority youth vulnerable

1.4 LGBT different in that they usually have to cope with both on own, without family or support of friends

1.5 Higher risk of mental health problems:

**1.5.1** 74% self-harmed – three times higher than national average

**1.5.2** 56% suicide attempts – 72% at 16 years or below!

### **2. RISK FACTORS**

#### **2.1 MULTIPLE MINORITIES**

- 50 GALYIC members, mean age 17.8 years;
- 48% of the NAT participants were male, 46% female, 6% transgender;
- mixed backgrounds but high percentage came from poor, lower class families

#### **2.2 COMING OUT**

- Need to come out to develop positive identity; but vulnerable to rejection
- Self-identify 12.4 years
- 14.8 years come out to another person – age dropped significantly
- 2.4 years of 'agonising/confusion'
- At a time when most pressure to conform
- 50% not accepted by first person came out to
- 41% lost a friend when came out to them

#### **2.3 ISOLATION**

- 82% no info about homosexuality at school
- The most isolated were those who had not yet attended the group

#### **2.4 HOMOPHOBIC BULLYING**

- 74% witnessed someone being bullied because pupils thought they were gay
- 92% experienced bullying
- 76% experienced bullying because pupils thought they were gay

#### **2.5 PARENTAL REJECTION/NON-ACCEPTANCE/SUPPORT**

- Only 18% had full acceptance from both parents
- 22% not out to parents

#### **2.6 HOMOPHOBIC ABUSE**

- 58% witnessed homophobic hate incident
- 94% experienced hate incident
- 68% homophobic, including
  - 88% Verbal abuse
  - 60% Threats/intimidation
  - 56% Harassment
  - 50% Physical

## 2.7 SEXUAL VULNERABILITY

- 24% raped
- 32% sexually abused

## 2.8 HOMELESSNESS

- 42% sleep at friend's house
- 26% homeless

## 2.9 SUBSTANCE MISUSE

- 58% have or potentially have alcohol problems
- 46% smoke
- 44% use drugs

## 2.10 MENTAL HEALTH

- 72% experienced long periods of depression
- 50% anxiety

## 3. INAPPROPRIATE INTERVENTIONS – the tenth risk factor

Case Study: Julie's Story: *When GALYIC was first set up new members were interviewed using the wide-ranging questionnaire developed for the original research of 1998. Interviews were conducted by Jan Bridget and tape recorded then transcribed. The following is taken from an in-depth interview with Julie (not her real name) who grew up in Halifax and identified as a lesbian. She died of a heroin overdose in July 2000; she was 20 years old.*

**Gender:** Julie didn't play with girls' toys when she was growing up; she recalls that she once tore her dress off. She loved trees. She wanted to be a boy because she thought life would be easier. Sometimes people would say to her, "You're like a lad you are." When she played with cars, climbed trees and wanted a Scalectrix, people would say "They're boys' toys, what do you want them for?"

**School:** Julie was aware of her sexuality whilst she was at school but kept thinking it was a phase she'd grow out of.

She was bullied because she was 'different.' She didn't conform to everyone's idea of 'normal.' She was also bullied because she was in care. The bullying affected her grades. It began in junior school and continued until she left high school. Julie hated school and couldn't wait to leave.

She said she would have liked some information about homosexuality at school; she expected it to be mentioned and kept waiting but it never was.

**College:** Julie went to college but quickly dropped out. She said she wasn't out because, "I wasn't opening myself up to being vulnerable."

**Training:** From college Julie went onto a manual trades training course that included painting, decorating, carpentry and brick-laying. One of the other trainees accused her of being lesbian. She felt vulnerable because of all the blokes on the course but didn't feel able to talk to anyone, so she dropped out. She wasn't out to staff.

**Social Services:** Julie was in and out of care from the age of 9 to 16. She usually ended up with the same foster mother.

She got on quite well with her foster mother but didn't feel comfortable because she was, trying to pretend to be heterosexual. She was made to share a bedroom with another young woman which made things really difficult.

Whilst she liked her foster mum, she was homophobic: she made it quite clear she didn't like the idea of lesbians. Needless to say, Julie never told her she was lesbian until she left.

**GP:** Julie wasn't out to her doctor, she said she nearly told him once but decided not to because she didn't feel he would accept it.

**Mental Health Services:** Julie first started having suicidal thoughts and long periods of depression when she was 13. She turned to her doctor for support who got her admitted to hospital. She had tried to kill herself 12 or 13 times including tablets, cutting her wrists and hanging. She was admitted to hospital several times; on one occasion, after taking tablets when she was 14, she was told she was stupid and selfish.

Julie had seen a psychiatrist, psychologist, and an art therapist and was due to see someone else but had put off her appointments because the person she had to see was a man. None of them knew about her being lesbian. She said she couldn't talk to any of them and at the time she didn't want to. On one of the occasions when Julie was in hospital, a psychiatric nurse asked her if she was lesbian. Julie said, "that was when it first started to click."

**Housing:** Julie lived in a homeless hostel for a few months but this wasn't a safe place because it was full of people who used drugs and who would, quote, "beat you up if they didn't like your ideas." She said they would take the mick out of people on television who were gay. She said this irritated her, because she was trying to come to terms with being gay herself at the time. She added, "I think it pushed me down a bit, like, I convinced myself even more, to fit in with their views, 'cos at first I thought, this isn't normal."

Julie was in supported lodgings for a time; she didn't think to ask for a gay provider and anyway, she wasn't sure about her sexuality at that time but, she said, "the staff were very supportive." When asked if it would have made a difference had she had a gay provider she said "Probably a lot of difference 'cos I ended up with someone I didn't get on with."

**Drugs:** Julie didn't drink too much but she had taken illegal drugs. She had taken heroin once when she was living in the homeless hostel: another tenant told her if she didn't take any she'd bite her arms and legs. The same girl used to bully Julie to give her money. This lasted about three months. Julie told someone when she was due to leave the hostel and the bully threatened to kill her. Julie had been to the local alcohol and drugs treatment centre but she wasn't out. She said she didn't feel she could have come out to them.

**Youth Service:** Julie once attended a mainstream youth group and went on trips with them. She recalled that there was no information about being lesbian and said she would have liked some, as that was when she first started questioning her sexuality. The topic of homosexuality was never brought up at the youth group; Julie said, "It was all about being straight." The only information she was ever given at school, youth groups, or social services was about being straight and how to fit condoms.

**The Leaving Care Team:** The Leaving Care Team was the one agency that seemed to give Julie the most support with regard to her sexuality. Julie came out to one of the workers. She said, "It made me feel good, because she asked me if I wanted her to let the other staff know, that was easier. They were brilliant. They gave me loads of information via one of the workers who was an out lesbian. It was brilliant having an out worker because some of the stuff I can't talk to about with the others I can go and talk to her about; she seems to understand me more than anybody, it's great." Julie did say, however, "I still can't go into it in any depth with anybody, although I'm finding it a bit easier as time goes on."

**Coming Out:** Julie was about 12 years old when she first thought she might be lesbian but she didn't come out until she was 18.

"At first it were like, am I or aren't I? Then it were a phase, but you can't have a phase for six years. That's because of the view that was put to me in foster care, that it's not normal and you're a freak of nature and stuff like that. Then, I thought, 'No, it's normal.'

Julie came out to her mum after coming out of hospital for depression. She said to her mother, who only had a one-bedroomed flat, "You might not want to share a bed with me, that's fine, I'll sleep on the settee, whatever, but I've got something to tell you." Her mother said she didn't care, that Julie was still her daughter and was still the same person as she was before and that she still loved her.

Julie also came out to her dad, he didn't say much, but she pointed out that two of his sons were also gay.

Since coming out Julie says she is more at ease with herself, more relaxed. But added, "Every day I go through mind games – "Am I or aren't I?"

She said, "It is difficult being young and lesbian because you don't know what is what, you don't know who to talk to."

Her worst coming out experience was with her foster mother who said, "What are you going to come out with next? It is a freak of nature, not normal, makes me feel sick. Lesbians are even worse than gay men."

Her foster mother told all her family which Julie didn't want her to do. One of the children in the family asked Julie, in front of all the rest of the family at a party, whether she was a lesbian? Julie said she wanted the ground to open up and swallow her. She said she just walked out of the room, thinking that this was the best way to deal with it. This happened about a week after her father had died.

Julie said her foster mother's response made her feel uncomfortable but added, "she's coming round to the idea; she said, she accepts me for who I am but not for what I am." Not long after this Julie died of a heroin overdose.

#### **4. DEVELOPING RESILIENCE**

##### **4.1 GALYIC SERVICES – challenging isolation – developing positive identity**

- Regularly have 20+ members attending weekly youth group
- Weekly drop-in
- 1-1 Support
- Crisis Intervention
- Youth Council
- Project Work
  - Publicity
  - DVD
  - Presentations

##### **4.2 IMPACT ASSESSMENTS**

25 follow-up Impact assessment interviews:

- 100% positive LGBT identity
- 96% improved their confidence
- 92% less isolated
- 81% reduced depression
- 83% reduced suicidal
- 79% reduced self-harm
- 75% reduced phobia

#### **5. WAY FORWARD FOR CAMHS**

- 5.1 Awareness Training
- 5.2 LGBT-Friendly
- 5.3 Zero tolerance of homophobia
- 5.4 Information
- 5.5 Monitoring
- 5.6 Assessment
- 5.7 Referral to local LGBT Youth Group
- 5.8 Partnership work with local LGBT Youth Group
- 5.9 Specialist Worker/Project
- 5.10 Publicity

#### **FURTHER RESOURCES**

[www.cypf.csip.org.uk/social-inclusion](http://www.cypf.csip.org.uk/social-inclusion) (LGBT Young People)