

## Understanding the impact of trauma and stress for LGBTI people with dementia



Older people who are LGBTI may have lived during a time when disclosing their sexuality, gender identity, or variations in sex characteristics\* could lead to stigmatisation, discrimination, persecution and loss.

For a person living with dementia, the long-lasting psychological impact of reliving the trauma of these times may continue or it may reveal itself for the first time through changes in behaviour.

This help sheet provides information and tips for care staff to better understand the life events the LGBTI person with dementia may have experienced and enable tailored care and support.

### Why someone who is LGBTI may experience behaviours and psychological symptoms of dementia due to past history or trauma

- Due to past discrimination, LGBTI people can distrust and be fearful of healthcare services. For the person with dementia, living in aged care may bring back memories of trauma and persecution.
- A person having a variation of sex characteristics may have spent a lot of time in secrecy with shame and distrust of the medical system due to attempts to 'normalise' their body.
- The need to fit in or fear to disclose sexual orientation or gender identity can delay access to appropriate individualised care and be a source of stress.
- Understanding life story is an important part of individualised care – but for some LGBTI people it can be even more stressful and be a triggering of traumatic experiences.
- Some family members and aged care staff may not be accepting of the person's identity or variation in sex characteristic. Involuntary 'outing' or neglect can cause distress.
- If the person with dementia is unable to express their wishes, they may receive care that does not support their sexual orientation or gender identity.

# Care Staff Helpsheet



## Other factors that can lead to changes in behaviour

- People who are LGBTIQ+ have higher rates of depression and anxiety than people who are not part of LGBTIQ+ communities (1).
- Older LGBTIQ+ people are more likely to be single, live on their own and have smaller social networks compared to older people

who aren't LGBTIQ+ (2,3). Older LGBTIQ+ people are also less likely to have children (2,3). This may lead to increased loneliness and isolation.

- LGBTIQ+ people from different cultural backgrounds can experience added trauma due to discrimination from both racism and homophobia/transphobia/biphobia/interphobia.\*\*

## Tips to help care for someone who is LGBTIQ+ with dementia and is experiencing stress and trauma

Creating an LGBTIQ+ inclusive environment will help the person feel safe and connected with their community, which can reduce anxiety and stress.

- Get to know the person's life history and understand if there is anything that may trigger a negative response, such as provision of personal care, specific dates and anniversaries.
- Discuss what makes the person feel safe and which strategies could be implemented when responding to stress. For example, going for a walk, being outdoors or listening to music.
- Avoid making assumptions about what the person likes or dislikes, based on their sexual orientation. For example, if a person identifies as gay, do not assume he would enjoy more feminine activities.
- Do not be afraid to ask the person how they would like to be identified such as lesbian, gay or trans. Or ask them what name they prefer to be called.
- Respect and acknowledge the person's family of choice, who may be different to their biological or family of origin.
- Allow and support the person to maintain their identity or intersex status and live the life which is authentic to them. Support the person to wear clothing/make-up that aligns to their gender (not biological sex), involve the person's partner and/or chosen family in care home events.
- If appropriate consider celebrating LGBTIQ+ events and significant dates such as pride month.
- Provide access for staff to undertake LGBTIQ+ awareness training.

## Our partnership with LGBTIQ+ Health Australia enables DSA to access LGBTIQ+ specific strategies and approaches.

<https://www.lgbtiqhealth.org.au/>

\*Physical sex characteristics that do not conform to medical norms for female or male bodies.

\*\*The fear or hatred of people who do not meet society's gender role expectations.

## References

1. Snapshot of mental health and suicide prevention statistics for LGBTIQ+ people – April 2021  
[www.lgbtiqhealth.org.au/statistics](http://www.lgbtiqhealth.org.au/statistics)
2. Facts on LGBTIQ+ Ageing – March 2020  
<https://www.sageusa.org>
3. Improving the Lives of LGBT Older Adults, Movement Advancement Project and SAGE - 2010  
<https://www.lgbtmap.org/improving-the-lives-of-lgbt-older-adults>