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HEALTH

Lesbians and Suicide

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Counselor Sherrie Burch remembers when the threat of suicide hit close to home. One of her relatives, a teenage girl, was having difficulty coming to terms with her lesbian sexual orientation, and her parents' deep-seated religious convictions made it difficult to find a place to turn.

"She was seriously thinking about committing suicide because she didn't want to tell her parents," remembers Burch, a suicide and HIV counselor at Las Vegas' Community Counseling Center, which serves many members of the city's LGBT community.

Although the teenager's story had a happy ending (she eventually came out with Burch's support), this is not always the case for young lesbians who experience suicidal feelings. In their 1997 study that examined suicide attempts among 194 lesbian, gay and bisexual 15-21 year-olds in over a dozen queer groups, researchers Scott L. Hershberger and Neil W. Pilkington found that 43% of the surveyed females had tried to commit suicide at least once. Only 23% of the 194 surveyed youth were lesbian or female bisexuals. Just four years earlier, researchers Herdt and Boxer found that over half of the young lesbians attending Horizons, a Chicago social services support agency for gay and lesbian youth, had attempted suicide.

Despite these and other studies, the National Institute of Mental Health says that determining the suicide rates of lesbians, gay men and bisexuals can be difficult for a variety of reasons. Despite the oft-quoted statistic that GLBT individuals comprise 10% of any population, the "proportion of the U.S. population that considers themselves gay, lesbian or bisexual" is still unknown. Further, "[s]exual orientation is a personal characteristic that people can, and often do choose to hide," making this part of them difficult to determine. While Burch agrees there is currently no surefire way to know how many lesbians attempt suicide each year, suicide still affects lesbians of all ages.

"More women actually attempt suicide," she explains. "But more men succeed because they use more lethal methods," such as handguns—a rarer method for women who often attempt to poison themselves or overdose on medication.

Despite these dire statistics, Burch still says she sees more gay men than lesbians for suicidal thoughts related to sexual orientation. And even when she does see women, it's often because a concerned loved one has brought them in for counseling.

"You'd think that guys would be more reluctant to come in because of the macho image kind of thing," she says. "But I think it might be [because] the women, when they do come in, they're really in desperation. It takes more for them to come in than it does for the men."

Why would it take more? "It's often women who are the head of the household, the nurturer, [the one] taking care of the kids so it's a harder drop for them when they can't do that," Burch explains. "They might be emotionally dissociating because they're trying to figure out 'Who am I? I'm gay, I'm supposed to be the mother, I'm supposed to have children, and I'm supposed to be the nurturing one.' And in some cases they think they can't do that."

While suicidal feelings relating to sexual orientation can affect lesbians of all ages, not just youth, Burch says, other problems can also cause lesbians to feel suicidal. These include depression and drug and alcohol abuse.

"It's like which came first the chicken or the egg," she says. "Did the depression come before the drugs and alcohol or did the drugs and alcohol create the depression? A lot of times it's because of the depression. They get on the drugs and alcohol and their inhibitions are down. They may commit suicide when they're high or drunk because they don't have the common sense to say, 'Wait a minute! I can do something else besides kill myself.'"

For older lesbians, the end of a romantic relationship can also trigger suicidal

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feelings.

“I think maybe when they’re younger the orientation is a big issue because of coming out,” Burch says. “But as [lesbians] get older they’re just like everyone else. They have the same problems. But relationship problems might come out a bit more because when a relationship ends, it’s not like with heterosexuals where the pool of possible mates is huge. So that kind of gets scary. They can wonder, ‘Am I going to be alone for the rest of my life?’ And the end of a relationship sometimes can really make it seem more that [suicide] is a way out.”

But suicide, as any clinician or counselor will tell someone, is never a way out.

“It’s like the old adage, it’s a permanent solution to a temporary problem,” Burch explains. While there may be few statistics about lesbians and suicide, there are a number of national and local organizations and programs available to gay women who have considered or attempted killing themselves. These include the Trevor Hotline, specializing in gay and lesbian youth suicide prevention at 1-800-850- 8078, and the Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender Helpline at 1-888-340-4528.

Although not gay and lesbian specific, Utah’s suicide hotline is listed in the Lavender Book. They can be reached at 261-1442.

