



Providing Support and Services to Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual People in Abusive Same-Gender Relationships

Adapted by Cindy Holmes from "Appendix A, Safety Assessment and Planning for Women in Abusive Same-Gender Relationships" in the Aid to Safety Assessment and Planning (ASAP), to be published in 2006 by the British Columbia Institute Against Family Violence (BCIFV).

"Same-gender" is used in place of the more common "same-sex" to refer to people who are attracted to and in relationships with people of the same gender *regardless of their sex* (i.e. lesbian and gay relationships). Gender refers to self-perception and how we want to demonstrate gender to others, while sex refers to the physical aspects of one's body. Some people do not use the words lesbian, gay or bisexual (LGB) to describe themselves. Some people's *primary* identification may be their cultural/racial/ethnic and/or gender identity (i.e. trans) rather than their sexual orientation. Lesbian/gay/bisexual communities are diverse in terms of ethnicity, culture, religion, class, ability, gender identity, political belief, family structure and age. Other identities within the same-gender category are queer, femme, butch and Two-Spirit.

SOCIAL CONTEXT AND ACCESSING SUPPORT

Same-gender partner abuse is often ignored, minimized or misunderstood by families, friends, communities and service providers as a result of harmful stereotypes and misconceptions about LGB people and lack of information about the reality and dynamics of abuse in same-gender relationships. Few appropriate services exist for victims or offenders.

Many LGB people fear that speaking out about abuse in same-gender relationships will be used to fuel negative stereotypes of LGB people as "sick", "perverted" or "abnormal". They may be reluctant to speak about their experiences of abuse for fear of negative responses from those who are not aware of their sexual orientation. Many LGB people experience alienation from families of origin and as a result may place greater value on intimate relationships as their source of family and support, making it difficult to leave or speak out. The potential for re-victimization from various systems such as criminal justice or health care — through harassment, assault, blame, "outing", dismissal or ignoring the violence — is another barrier to obtaining support.

Many forms of abuse are similar to those in abusive heterosexual relationships: physical, emotional/psychological, sexual, economic, property destruction, using children and/or stalking. Specific forms of abuse relate to heterosexism, homophobia and biphobia (e.g., threats to disclose sexual identity to family, friends, employer, service providers and in child custody/access or immigration contexts where disclosure could jeopardize legal rights or status); shame and insults about one's sexual identity; using cultural invisibility of lesbian, gay, bisexual people to isolate the partner; limiting access to accurate information about lesbian, gay, bisexual communities and relationships; and/or threats to disclose HIV/AIDS status of a partner.

ASSESSMENT

Service providers must attend to two related forms of assessment: a) abusive dynamics and identification of victim/perpetrator; and b) safety or risk. In many cases the dynamics of abuse are clear. In others they may be confusing. One victim might describe an ongoing pattern of abuse while another describes an unpredictable pattern or where abuse happens less often. A victim may have used physical violence to defend themselves and may believe they are abusive. An abusive partner may present as a victim because they feel victimized or use this as a tactic to undermine their partner. Someone may have been abused in one relationship and abusive in the next. In some cases, there may be shifting power dynamics in the relationship. It is important not to assume the abuse is mutual just because it involves people of the same gender or because it is complex. The assessment process should not happen quickly. It is important to take the necessary time to be thorough and gather as much information as possible.

RESOURCES

Pamphlets: abuse in same-gender relationships and health gay/lesbian relationships – BC Association of Specialized Victim Assistance and Counselling Program - www.endingviolence.org and The Centre: a community centre serving and supporting lesbian, gay, transgender, bisexual people and their allies - www.lgtbcentrevancouver.com. *Manual: Removing Barriers and Building Access* (2004) by Peter Toppings of The Centre. www.lgtbcentrevancouver.com. *Book: No More Secrets: Violence in Lesbian Relationships* (2002), by Janice Ristock