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Addressing the Needs of Lesbian Women

A Provider's Introduction to Substance Abuse
Treatment for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and
Transgender Individuals

Second Edition

Learning Objectives:

By the end of this module, participants will be able to:

- *Identify two challenges to describing contemporary lesbian women in research.*
- *Identify two factors that might contribute to substance use among lesbian clients.*
- *Identify two barriers for health screening and check-ups for lesbian clients.*





Lesbian Women



Lesbian Women:

For this module, when using the term “lesbian women,” we are referring to:

- *Women who identify as: lesbian, gay, or queer.*
- *However, there are some definitional limitations:*
 - *Not all women who are predominately romantically and sexually attracted to women use the terms: lesbian, gay, or queer.*
- *Example: a qualitative study of lesbian sexuality and family formation, found older participants tended to identify as “gay,” “gay woman,” or “in the life.”*

(Moore, 2011)



Lesbian Women:

There are research limitations in describing who lesbian women are:

- *“Lesbians are often ignored or under-represented in studies of homosexuality.”*

(Hughes & Wilsnack 1997)

- *Research tends to focus on younger, college educated, and most visible lesbian women.*

(Hughes & Wilsnack, 1997)

- *Mental health research on lesbian women and gay men finds that they are “extremely vulnerable to biased interpretations.” For example, a provider may view homosexuality as a sin, therefore citing “homosexuality” being the root cause of their mental health problems.*

(Cochran, 2001)



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Lesbian Women:

There are also larger, systemic challenges to understanding the health needs of lesbian women, such as a limited evidence base for women's health care, which can make it easier for biased cultural assumptions and attitudes that devalue and subordinate women.

(Zimmerman & Hill, 2000)

Specifically, when research is not inclusive of racial/ethnic, gender, and/or sexual orientation diversity, providers might make the mistake of assuming health disparities do not affect those populations.



Lesbian Women:

Because of these challenges, there might be real and perceived barriers for lesbian women to access health services:

- *Lack of available information on lesbian-specific healthcare risks and screening recommendations.*

(ACOG, 2014)

- *Fear of receiving biased care and/or history of discrimination from providers in the past.*

- *Concerns about confidentiality and disclosure.*





*Related Health
Issues for Lesbian
Women*



Related Health Issues for Lesbian Women:

One way to approach screening and treatment guidelines for lesbian women is to respectfully treat an individual according to their physiology, sexual behavior and the risk they are exposed to.

- *Again, providers should be mindful of real and perceived barriers for lesbian women to access health services, such as homophobia, discrimination, and lack of confidentiality.*
- *Barriers to health services can interfere with health problems getting routinely checked and treated.*
- *Health problems may only be screened at advanced, or late stages of disease progression.*
 - *Example: cervical, breast, or testicular cancers.*

(Dibble & Robertson, 2010)



Related Health Issues for Lesbian Women:

- *A recommendation for, “effective screening requires that providers and their female clients engage in a comprehensive and open discussion not only about sexual identity, but sexual and behavioral risks.”*
- *It is important to remember, many self-identified women who have sex with women report history of, or currently engage in heterosexual behavior.*

(CDC, 2010)



Related Health Issues for Lesbian Women:

- The CDC recommends that, “routine cervical cancer screening should be offered to all women, regardless of sexual orientation, sexual practices, gender expression and gender identity and women should be offered HPV vaccine in accordance with current guidelines.”



(CDC, 2010)



Related Health Issues for Lesbian Women:

Substance use:

- *Lesbian women use substance/alcohol more often than heterosexual women, this can be due to stress from homophobia, sexism, misogyny, fear of disclosure and/or discrimination/marginalization.*
- *Lesbian women may also use “social circles” as a form of finding community/support . Activities in these circles may involve using alcohol/substance, therefore increasing exposure and access to alcohol and substance use.*
- *Lesbian women may need support to find healthy ways to cope and reduce stress, as well as seek community.*

(Dibble & Robertson, 2010)



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Related Health Issues for Lesbian Women:

Substance use cont.:

- *Heavy drinking and binge drinking are more common among lesbian women than heterosexual women.*
- *Heavy drinking for women, as defined by SAMHSA, is drinking 5 or more drinks on the same occasion on each of 5 or more days in the past 30 days (2015).*
- *Heavy drinking is associated with increased risk of cancer, liver disease, and other health problems.*

(Hughes & Eliason, 2002; Dibble & Robertson, 2010)



Related Health Issues for Lesbian Women:

Substance use cont.:

- *Compared with heterosexual women, lesbian women are less likely to abstain from drinking alcohol, and are more likely to report heavy episodic drinking, negative consequences associated with drinking, symptoms of alcohol dependence, and help-seeking for alcohol related problems.*

(Laurie, D., et al., 2013; Gedro, J., 2014)



Related Health Issues for Lesbian Women:

STIs and safer sex:

- *Lesbians can get the same STIs as heterosexual women.*
- *Lesbians, can give each other STIs by skin-to-skin contact, mucus membrane contact, vaginal fluids, and menstrual blood.*
- *It is important for sexually active lesbians to be screened for STIs, Pap Test, HPV, by a healthcare provider and to use barrier methods where appropriate.*

(Womenshealth.gov)



Related Health Issues for Lesbian Women:

Gynecological cancers:

- *Lesbian women have higher risks for certain types of gynecological (GYN) cancers compared to heterosexual women. Having regular pelvic exams and pap test can find cancers early and offer the best chance of cure.*

(National LGBT Cancer Network, 2015)

- *Many lesbian women do not seek screening for cervical and ovarian cancers at recommended rates.*

(Dibble & Robertson, 2010)

- *As stated earlier, lesbian women are more likely to access healthcare in later stages of disease progression and less likely to get regular medical/gynecological care than heterosexual women.*

(National LGBT Cancer Network, 2015)



Related Health Issues for Lesbian Women:

Gynecological cancers cont.:

– *Barriers to screenings can include:*

- *Client may think there are fewer perceived benefits from screening and treatment.*
- *Client may have experienced prior discrimination from healthcare providers, thus does not want to return.*

– *Recommended screening guidelines for lesbian clients:*

- *Pap Test for those 21+ years and older.*
- *HPV Test 30+ years and older.*
- *STI (HIV, Syphilis, Chlamydia, etc...) screening for those sexually active.*



(Gruskin et al., 2001; McNair et al., 2005; Saulnier, 2002; Roberts et al., 2004; Tracy, Ivdecker, & Ireland, 2010)



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Related Health Issues for Lesbian Women:

Breast cancer:

– *Some risk factors may be more relevant to lesbian women than heterosexual women. For all women, higher breast cancer risk is associated with:*

- *Clients with no history of full-term birth at an early age.*

(CDC, 2014; Kobayashi et al., 2012)

- *Clients who report excessive alcohol use.*

(CDC, 2014)

- *Clients who are obese.*

(CDC, 2014)



Related Health Issues for Lesbian Women:

Tobacco use:

- *Lesbian women report higher rates of tobacco use compared to heterosexual women.*
- *Increased smoking rates associated with higher rates of cancers, heart disease, and emphysema among lesbians.*

(Gruskin et al., 2007; Lee et al., 2014; Dibble & Robertson, 2010)



Lesbian Women Smoking

Tobacco Use cont.:

- *Compared to heterosexual Latina women in their mid-30s, lesbian Latina women were at elevated risk for problems related to smoking, asthma, and disability.*

(Kim & Fredricksen Goldsen, 2012)



Related Health Issues for Lesbian Women:

Heart disease:

- *Heart disease is the leading cause of death for women.*
- *Smoking and obesity are the biggest risk factors of heart disease among lesbians.*
- *All lesbian women need yearly medical exams for high blood pressure, cholesterol problems, and diabetes.*
- *Providers can offer support for lesbian clients who wish to quit smoking, increase their physical activity, and control their weight.*



Related Health Issues for Lesbian Women:

Body image/weight related health issues:

- *Research shows that lesbian women are more likely to be overweight or obese compared to heterosexual women. Obesity is associated with higher rates of heart disease, cancers, diabetes, and premature death.*
- *Lesbian women could benefit from competent and supportive advice about healthy living and healthy eating, as well as healthy exercise.*

(Dibble & Robertson, 2010)



Related Health Issues for Lesbian Women:

Mental health and minority stress-related concerns:

- *Lesbian women may experience minority stress from discrimination and stigmatization.*
- *Minority stress is defined by chronically high levels of stress faced by members of stigmatized minority groups. (Herek, 2009)*
- *This stress is worse for women who need to hide their orientation, as well as for lesbian women who have lost important emotional support because of their sexual orientation.*
- *Minority stress is further discussed in Considerations for Clinical Work with LGBT Individuals.*

(Sue et al., 2007; Walters et al., 2002)



Lesbian Women and Minority Stress:

Mental health and minority stress-related concerns cont.:

- *American Indian and Alaska Native lesbian women report greater discrimination and trauma within their tribes than do their heterosexual peers.*

(Balsam et al., 2004)





Provider Considerations



Provider Considerations:

It is important for providers to remember, contrary to some stereotypes, lesbian women do experience violence in their intimate/romantic relationships.

- *However, health care providers might not readily ask lesbian women about inter-personal violence/domestic violence as often as they ask heterosexual women.*
- *Lesbian women need to be asked about violence (e.g. intimate partner) in their lives and have access to LGBT affirming counseling and shelters when needed.*

(Dibble & Robertson, 2010)



Provider Considerations:

- Providers can foster and encourage positive support systems.
 - *Examples: film festivals, book clubs, grass roots causes, and community coalitions.*
- Providers working with lesbian women and other culturally diverse clients should consider disclosure of their own gender, sexual orientation, race/ethnicity. For some groups, this may be important for establishing patient trust.



Provider Considerations:

On the following slides are select 2015 evidence-based mental health interventions of SAMHSA's National Registry of Evidence-Based Programs and Practices for Women-focused Interventions.

- *No EBP interventions specifically for use with lesbian-identified women, although some have been developed for both gay men and lesbians.*



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ADDICTION RECOVERY SERVICES LLC



Jesse Heffernan

920-680-5991

jheffernan@heliosrecovery.com

www.heliosrecovery.com



*Questions and
Comments?*



Provider Considerations:

Selected Evidence-Based Treatments:

Intervention Title	Targeted Concern (s)	Description
<p>Prolonged Exposure (PE) Therapy (Foa, 2015)</p> <p>*Efficacy with women well-established</p>	<p>Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)</p>	<p>Individualized cognitive-behavioral treatment program “designed to help clients process traumatic events” and “reduce their PTSD symptoms as well as depression, anger, and general anxiety.” 8-15 90 minute sessions.</p>
<p>CHOICES: A Program for Women About Choosing Healthy Behaviors (Floyd et al., 2007)</p>	<p>Risky drinking and sexual behavior, alcohol-exposed pregnancy</p>	<p>“Brief intervention designed to help women lower their risk of alcohol-exposed pregnancy... consists of four 45-minute motivational interviewing sessions with a counselor/interventionist and one contraception counseling visit with a health care provider over a 12- to 14-week period”</p>

(SAMHSA’s National Registry of Evidence-based Programs and Practices)



Provider Considerations:

Selected Evidence-Based Treatments cont.:

Intervention Title	Targeted Concern	Description
Trauma Recovery and Empowerment Model (TREM) (Toussaint, 2007)	Substance abuse & history of sexual and physical abuse	“Gender-specific 24- to 29-session group emphasizes the development of coping skills and social support. It addresses both short-term and long-term consequences of violent victimization, including mental health symptoms, especially posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and depression, and substance abuse.”

(SAMHSA’s National Registry of Evidence-based Programs and Practices)



Provider Considerations:

Interventions proven to be effective:

Intervention Title	Targeted Concern (s)	Description
Alcohol Behavioral Couple Therapy (ABCT) for gay and lesbian couples with alcohol use disorders (Fals-Steward, O'Farrell, & Lam, 2009)	Individuals with alcohol use disorders and their non-substance-abusing same-sex relationship partners.	Both gay and lesbian couples who received BCT and individual therapy for the identified client with alcohol use disorder did significantly better than the couples who only received individual therapy for the client with alcohol use disorder.



Provider Considerations:

Interventions proven to be effective:

Intervention Title	Targeted Concern (s)	Description
Specific alcohol and other drug treatment for gay and lesbian individuals (Rowan, Jenkins & Parks, 2013)	Culturally specific alcohol and other drug treatment programs	Results indicate three major themes that make this type of treatment valuable: (1) a separate treatment unit or facility, (2) a safe and supportive therapeutic milieu, and (3) specific tailored treatment approaches.
A Women's Path to Recovery (Najavits et al., 2007)	Substance abuse	"Clinician-led program...helps women look at their lives in relation to gender and addiction issues...Difficult areas in a woman's life are explored through the psychology that underlies female addictive behavior."



Provider Considerations:

- According to the Institute of Medicine (2015), Person-centered planning (approach) is, “A highly individualized comprehensive approach to assessment and services that is founded on an understanding of the person’s history, strengths, needs, and vision of his or her own recovery and includes attention to issues of culture, spirituality, trauma, and other factors.”
- An aspect of working from a person-centered approach is moving away from the provider as being the “expert” in the room, with all their knowledge, skills and training as a behavioral health provider.
- Rather, the client is the expert in the room. The client holds the experience, knowledge and goals for their own health and wellness.

https://www.omh.ny.gov/omhweb/pros/Person_Centered_Workbook/Chapter1.pdf



Provider Considerations:

- Lastly, it is recommended providers and organizations adopt an “inviting, person-centered approach” toward lesbians seeking healthcare, assuring delivery systems are inclusive of all aspects of lesbian health.
- When adapting a “person-centered approach,” examining cultural contexts such as heterosexism, homophobia and racism might be helpful in identifying underlying factors compromising health and wellness for lesbian clients.

(Gruskin et al., 2001; McNair et al., 2005; Saulnier, 2002; Roberts et al., 2004; Lydecker & Ireland, 2010)



Authors:

- Nazbah Tom, MA
– *Somatic Practitioner, Toronto, Canada*
- Dulce Garcia, MA
– *Bilingual/Spanish Community Education Consultant, San Francisco Women Against Rape (SFWAR), San Francisco, CA*
- Adam Lewis, BA
– *Graduate Assistant, National American Indian and Alaska Native ATTC in Iowa City, IA*



Resources

- Womenshealth.gov lesbian and bisexual fact sheet:
<http://womenshealth.gov/publications/our-publications/fact-sheet/lesbian-bisexual-health.html>
- SAMHSA: Treatment approaches for women:
<http://store.samhsa.gov/product/Treatment-Approaches-for-Women/DVD206>
- Area Resource and Referral Organization for Women: Evidence-Based Lesbian Health:
<http://arrowlbt.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/Evid.-Based-Lesb.-Health-Articles.pdf>
- American Psychological Association: New data on lesbian, gay and bisexual mental health:
<http://www.apa.org/monitor/feb02/newdata.aspx>
- American Academy of Pediatrics: Gay and Lesbian Parents:
<http://www.healthychildren.org/English/family-life/family-dynamics/types-of-families/Pages/Gay-and-Lesbian-Parents.aspx>
- Gays and Lesbians in Alcoholics Anonymous:
<http://gal-aa.org/>
- COLAGE: People with LGBT Parents:
<http://www.colage.org/>



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