Self Harm and Suicide Risk for Same-Sex Attracted Young People: A Family Perspective

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents an overview of the risks of self-harm and suicide and in particular the importance of family in mental health outcomes for same-sex attracted young people (SSAY). Young people who are same-sex attracted (SSA) experience victimisation, harassment and abuse because of their sexual identity. Those who are open about their sexuality frequently experience abuse and rejection by family and friends. Consequently they do not feel safe about ‘coming-out’ instead prefer to keep their feelings hidden. This silence can lead to self-harming behaviours including substance abuse, indiscriminate and unsafe sexual practices, running away and even suicide. Community ignorance, prejudice and discrimination are key contributing factors to the ongoing invisibility and isolation of SSAY. Families also struggle with prejudice and discrimination and are not always equipped to support a young person questioning their sexuality. Aware and sensitive mental health workers can assist families gain confidence in dealing with the news that a young person is same-sex attracted. Implications for mental health practitioners and a model for affirmative and sensitive practice are presented.