

Lesbian /Gay Health

Therapy Anyone?

Given the stresses of living in our society, it is not surprising that many people seek the assistance of a mental health professional at some time. In this article, several gay-sensitive mental health counselors share what they see as the most salient issues among their lesbian, gay, and bisexual clients.

The lack of societal support for lesbians, gay men, and bisexual people creates strong feelings of alienation which can undermine a person's self esteem, identity, and ability to "connect" with others. Erica Marks, a psychotherapist in Burlington, notes that a lack of acceptance from family, friends, coworkers and society leads to great feelings of isolation, which can lead to depression, alcohol and drug use and abuse. Others agree, adding that substance abuse is often also a way of trying to escape one's feelings, and that having bars as virtually the only place for socializing adds to the problem. Bill Lippert, a psychologist and executive director of Counseling Services for Addison County, emphasizes that the problems gay men, lesbians and bisexual people bring into any therapy setting are the result of a very real, systematic, daily oppression.

Everyone interviewed, mentioned coming out as a major source of stress. Coming out at work or to ones family involves risks which make those decisions very difficult. However, not being out can be very stressful itself, due to worry about people "finding out", and having to hide parts of one's life. According to Walter Zeichner of the Forsberg Center in Burlington, decisions about coming out depend on the risks involved, the individual's personal strength, and the extent of her/his support networks. Clinical social worker Jim Morgan feels that active anxiety is often strongest when trying to decide whether or not to be out in a particular setting. Once a decision is made, a person can use it as a base for responses in specific situations. However, several counselors noted that we often end up putting our own needs on hold to gain acceptance, espe-

cially from our families. This creates a constant, subtle message that our relationships and identities are not valid, which is all too easy to internalize.

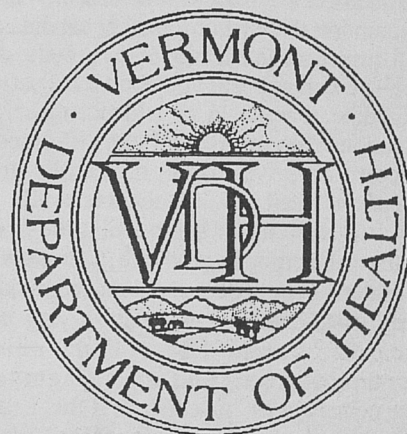
Karen Kreeda, a psychotherapist at the Creamery in Shelburne, says that since lesbians and gay men have no models or support for creating relationships, it is not surprising that problems concerning intimacy, communication, and realistic expectations surface quite frequently. She notes that these problems are often seen in anyone who has not had sufficient healthy interpersonal models, such as adult children of alcoholics and survivors of childhood sexual abuse and incest, which include many of her gay and lesbian clients. Erica Marks also mentions sexuality, relationships and intimacy issues as common among her lesbian and gay clients.

Several counselors suggest that lesbians may have difficulty with dependency and enmeshment (not maintaining the individual's independent identities within a relationship) since women are socialized to be supportive, put others' needs first, and give of themselves. Gay men, on the other hand, may have problems with interpersonal intimacy since men are socialized to not share their feelings with others. Bill Lippert agrees that this is part of the problem, but asserts it would be a mistake to underestimate the degree to which internalized oppression makes it hard for us to support our own relationships and those of others around us.

Seeking the services of a mental health professional should not be viewed negatively. Therapy can be an opportunity for problem-solving and personal growth. The counselors interviewed for this article agree that it is imperative that lesbians, gay men and bisexual people who are looking for a counselor, seek out a professional that is gay-sensitive. A good counselor will be aware of the effects of living in a homophobic society and should be free of assumptions and stereotypes that will interfere with treating a gay/lesbian/bisexual client

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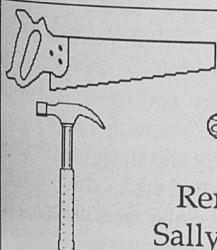
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