

Dyke Psyche: Are Lesbians Less Depressed?

by Esther Rothblum

Depression has been called the "common cold of psychiatry" because so many people become depressed in their lifetimes. They experience symptoms such as sadness, sleep difficulties, loss of appetite, change in weight, difficulties concentrating, tiredness, hopelessness, and even thoughts of suicide.

In dozens of surveys conducted in the U.S., women on average were twice as likely to experience depression compared with men. (Women and men do not differ in the frequency of severe "biological depressions," and so I will not be discussing them here.) When I first began doing research in the late 1970's, there was little knowledge about why women were at greater risk. This has changed. By now there have been several hundreds of research studies looking at gender differences in depression. These studies have found that there are aspects of being female in our society that place women at higher risk for depression.

Virtually none of these studies focused on lesbians. In fact, as I will argue here, some of these "risk factors" for women and depression may in fact not affect lesbians to a great extent. Others may affect lesbians in different ways than heterosexual women.

Marriage

One of the most intriguing demographic factors in several studies is that married women are more likely to get depressed than unmarried women, whereas the opposite is true for men. Possible reasons consider the role of housewife (a term assigned only to married women and which has a low status in our society) or the combination of employment plus the full responsibilities of housework and child care that many married women perform. Although about a quarter of lesbians have been married previously, most are not currently married to men. Lesbians, like most unmarried women, are not housewives, and lesbians in couples are more likely to share housework and childcare than are married couples. Despite tremendous societal pressure for women to be married, mental health statistics reveal that being single is psychologically "healthier." Thus, the fact that lesbians are usually not married may serve a protective function against depression.

Lack of social support

Friends, family members, life partners, and other people in our lives provide us with love and attention, give us advice and feedback, or offer us money and other necessary items in times of distress. Research in England found that women who did not have an intimate, confiding relationship and who were experiencing life stress were ten times more likely to experience depression than those women who were stressed but who had an intimate partner. People who sought help from a physician were less likely to have social support than those who did not.

Lesbians who have a high level of social support were less psychologically distressed (on a checklist that included items about depression). Both lesbians and gay men listed

their friends as the most frequent providers of social support, followed by their partners, families, and co-workers. However, sources of social support for some lesbians and gay men in this study included therapist, minister, neighbor, ex-partner, classmate, professor, partner's siblings, cat, dog, etc. — illustrating the diversity of our community of friends. Lesbians were three times more likely to rate friends rather than family members as providers of social support. This is quite different from heterosexuals, who tend to rate friends and family equally as sources of social support.

The author of this study interprets this difference in light of family members having difficulty accepting the lesbian and her partner, as well as the lesbian couple's need to keep distance from the family to avoid discovery of their lesbianism. In another study, only a quarter of lesbians had come out to their mothers, and even fewer to their fathers. Furthermore, lesbians were rarely out to employers, colleagues at work, teachers, students, or neighbors. This lack of disclosure would limit the sources of social support that lesbians have.

This implies that lesbians who are part of a supportive community and/or those with close friends may be more protected from depression. Lesbians who are socially isolated or those who cannot come out safely will probably not have family to fall back on during times of distress. For lesbians especially, our "family of friends" is more central to our lives than our family of origin.

Separation and divorce

Among heterosexual women, experiencing marital disruption in the form of separation and divorce is a risk factor for depression. Disruption in lesbian relationships is similarly stressful. For women who are not affiliated with a lesbian network, their lesbian lovers may be their only confidantes. Thus, depression may be a greater risk factor for lesbians who live far from an affirmative community, or lesbians who are not out to many people other than their partners.

Interestingly, some have speculated that lesbians adapt better than do heterosexual women after the termination of a relationship. This is because lesbians have had to be self-reliant for economic and social support, so they are less likely to be financially and socially incapacitated by the end of a relationship. Furthermore, lesbians, by actively choosing their lifestyles (rather than the more passive way in which most people select heterosexuality in our society) have more adaptive coping skills than more traditional heterosexual women.

Mothering young children

The presence of young children in the home is a major risk factor for heterosexual women due to the stress of child-rearing and the fact that women tend to have most of the responsibility for childcare. Since lesbians are less likely to have children, and since lesbian couples tend to share housework and childcare, mothering may be less of a risk factor for lesbians.

However, several issues confront lesbian parents that

are not frequently concerns for heterosexual parents: custody battles, homophobic remarks, and coming out to children. Most of all, lesbian mothers do not fit the "traditional family" mold presented by our society. Thus, for lesbians who do have young children, the stress may be significant.

Employment

Research indicates that employed heterosexual women reported more satisfaction and, if depressed, recovered more quickly than homemakers. A large percentage of lesbians in surveys are employed full-time. Unlike heterosexual women, they cannot legally marry their partners, and thus there is no lesbian equivalent of the "housewife." Furthermore, lesbians often cannot share their partners' assets or benefits, and since women earn less than men, few lesbians would be financially able to support a partner. Finally, lesbians may not be as restricted as heterosexual women by societal socialization, and may select jobs that are considered non-traditional for women.

Although there has been no research on employment as it relates to depression among lesbians, some researchers have demonstrated that the workplace may not be a secure place for all lesbians. About half of all lesbians in one survey reported the fear of losing their jobs if their lesbianism were known to their employers. Others stated that their jobs would become more difficult, or that they had actually lost jobs due to their sexual orientation. Thirteen percent of the lesbians in the Lesbian Health Care survey felt that they had lost their jobs because of their lesbianism.

Conclusion

Lesbians experience hostility and invisibility from the heterosexual macro-culture. Thus, the process of coming out requires an active sequence of events different from the relatively passive "default" process of becoming heterosexual. Lesbians must also find the lesbian community, which is not as easily identifiable as the heterosexual community. We know very little about the implications of these processes on depression among lesbians. However, there is evidence that once lesbians are out, they are at an advantage psychologically and socially.

Problems experienced by members of ethnic minority groups, adolescents, older women, or women in prison remain in need of closer examination. The double burden of being a lesbian in this society, in addition to differing demographically from the lesbian community, may increase rate of depression in these groups. ▼

Esther Rothblum is Professor of Psychology at the University of Vermont and Editor of the Journal of Lesbian Studies. "Dyke Psyche" will be a monthly column in Out in the Mountains. This piece was based on Esther's article "Depression Among Lesbians: An Invisible and Unresearched Phenomenon," which appeared in the Journal of Gay and Lesbian Psychotherapy, 1990, Volume one. For a full copy of the article, write to Esther c/o Dept. of Psychology, John Dewey Hall, University of Vermont, Burlington VT 05405 or e-mail her at e_rothbl@dewey.uvm.edu.

Cheryl Wheeler



**together
at
last**

Patty Larkin





Friday
April 25, 8 pm
Unitarian Church
Burlington
For fix Call
863.8326



in a benefit for the peace & justice center

Q: Searching for a Realtor with considerable experience?

A: Call on the agent people have been turning to for 15 years.

Bill Desautels
Realtor, CRS, GRI

North Professionals • 655-3333 ext. 17
Each office independently owned and operated
▼ Proud member of the Rainbow Business Association ▼