

**DYKE PSYCHE**  
by esther rothblum



## Are Lesbians More Protected From Becoming Depressed?

**D**epression has been called “the common cold of psychiatry” because so many people will become depressed in their lifetime. They will experience symptoms such as sadness, sleep difficulties, loss of appetite or change in weight, difficulty concentrating, tiredness, hopelessness, and even thoughts of suicide.

Women are much more likely to become depressed than are men. In dozens of surveys conducted in the U.S., women on average are twice as likely to experience depression compared with men. This is the case when interviewing people about mental health problems in community surveys as well as when determining reasons why women and men seek psychotherapy. (There are other types of depression that are more severe and also less common, and that sometimes are called “biological depressions.” Women and men do not differ in frequency of severe depressions like these, and I will not be discussing them here).

When I first began doing research on depression in the late 1970s, there was little knowledge about why women are at risk for becoming depressed. This has changed. By now there have been 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. What are the factors that place women at risk for depression and how might lesbians be affected by these?

Marriage. One of the intriguing demographic factors in a couple of studies on depression is that married women are more likely to get depressed than are women who have never married, whereas the opposite relationship is true for men – married men are less likely to get

depressed than those who have never been married.

Possible reasons for increased depression among married women have been thought to be either the role of housewife (which is a term assigned only to married women and which has low status in our society) or the combination of employment plus full responsibility for housework and childcare that many married women perform.

Although about a quarter of lesbians have been married previously, most lesbians 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, a life partner, 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. A number of studies have found a relationship between clinical depression and lack of social support. 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 their family physicians for depression were less likely to have social support than those who did not consult their physician.

What about lesbians and social support? 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 partner,

family, and co-workers.

However, sources of social support for some lesbians and gay men in this study included therapist, therapy group member, minister, neighbor, ex-partner, cat, dog, sister-in-law, classmate, partner’s parents, advisor, professor, cousin, grandmother, Alcoholics Anonymous, physician, nephew, clients, God, ex-spouse’s current spouse, partner’s ex-spouse, partner’s brother-in-law, secretary, and partner’s stepfather – 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 than heterosexuals, who tend to rate friends and family members equally as sources of social support.

How can we interpret this tendency for lesbians to consider friends more important than family members? 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. The major reasons cited by lesbians in that study for not being out to parents are fears of misunderstanding and rejection. 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 disrupt-

**E**sther Rothblum is on sabbatical in San Francisco this year and has decided to end the Dyke Psyche column. Although this column was syndicated in 26 lesbian periodicals, she wants to thank the readers of *Out in the Mountains*, where she first started the column.

The staff and readers of *Out in the Mountains* wish Esther the best of luck with her current and future endeavors and that her for the generous donation of her column to us over the past three years.

As a farewell, we are reprinting the first Dyke Psyche that ran in *OITM*.

tion 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 lover may be their only confidant. 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 partner.

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 lifestyle (rather than the more passive way people selected 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 than are heterosexual women 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 as frequently concerns for heterosexual parents: custody battles over competency to rear children, homophobic remarks made by others to the children, lesbian partners relating to the children, and coming out to children. Most of all, lesbian mothers do not fit the family mold presented by our society. Thus, for lesbians who do have young children, the stress may be significant.

Employment. Research on depression among heterosexual women indicates that full-

time employment serves a protective function against depression. Employed heterosexual women reported more satisfaction and if depressed, recovered faster than homemakers. A large percentage of lesbians in surveys are employed full-time. Unlike heterosexual women, they cannot legally marry their partner and thus there is no lesbian equivalent of the role of “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 are heterosexual women by societal socialization, and may select jobs that are 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 lesbianism. Thirteen percent of the lesbians in the Lesbian Health Care Survey felt they had lost their jobs because of their lesbianism.

In conclusion, there is indication that lesbians may have fewer categories of social support than do heterosexual women, and are thus more dependent on lesbian friends and partners. Thus, being part of a lesbian community becomes important for lesbians. Since most lesbians are not married to men, their unmarried status would seem to lend a protective factor to the risk of depression. Nevertheless, the termination of partnered relationships is a significant risk factor for depression. Lesbians are less likely than are heterosexual women to rear young chil-