



Studies show that rates of substance abuse are 2-4 times higher among lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and questioning (LGBTQ) youth than their heterosexual peers. LGBTQ youth report higher rates of cigarette, alcohol, and marijuana use, and are also more likely to use street drugs such as cocaine, methamphetamine and injection drugs.

What contributes to higher rates of substance use in LGBTQ youth?

LGBTQ youth, like straight youth, use alcohol and other drugs to experiment, to fit in with peers, and to relieve anxiety and emotional pain.

LGBTQ youth are at higher risk for use due to the experience of stigma and discrimination related to their sexual orientation or gender identity.

In a society where heterosexuality is the norm, LGBTQ youth may face rejection, avoidance, hostility, and harm where they live, learn, work and play.

LGBTQ youth who “come out” to their families often face disapproval, mistreatment, and violence, and may even be forced to leave their homes.

At school, LGBTQ youth consistently face victimization and bullying by other students, including verbal and physical harassment, and physical attacks.

The stress of having a stigmatized identity increases the risk of drug abuse for LGBTQ youth, who may use substances to cope with the multitude of challenges they face.

Preventing Substance Abuse among LGBTQ Youth:

We can all help create safer, more nurturing environments for LGBTQ youth.

Families: How parents respond to their LGBTQ children has a tremendous impact on their health and wellbeing. Family acceptance and support is a strong protector against depression, substance abuse, and suicidal thoughts and attempts.

Schools: Schools should establish strong anti-bullying policies, provide staff training, create “safe spaces” for LGBTQ students, encourage student-led clubs such as gay-straight alliances, and ensure that health curricula include information relevant to LGBTQ youth.

Substance abuse programs: To ensure that providers understand the issues and stressors faced by LGBTQ youth, substance abuse prevention and treatment programs should establish non-discrimination policies and build cultural competency.

Communities: LGBTQ youth need safe community spaces in which to socialize and develop, including welcoming gathering places and dedicated LGBTQ youth organizations.

Health Concerns:

As with other youth who use alcohol or other drugs, substance-abusing LGBTQ youth face increased risk of:

- Sexually transmitted diseases, including HIV
- Injuries resulting from fighting
- Motor vehicle crashes
- Decreased engagement in school and poor school performance

LGBTQ youth also have higher rates of depression and anxiety, and are 2-3 times more likely to attempt suicide.

For more information:

- SAMHSA’s LGBT Mental Health and Substance Abuse Data and Educational Resources, www.samhsa.gov/obhe/lgbt.aspx
- *Toward Comprehensive Inclusion: Addressing the needs of Rhode Island’s lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and questioning youth.* 2009 The RI Task Force for LGBTQ Youth www.youthprideri.org/Portals/0/Uploads/Documents/toward%20comprehensive%20inclusion.pdf
- Gay-Straight Alliance Network, www.gsanetwork.org/

Content Sources:

CDC LGBT Health pages www.cdc.gov/lgbthealth/youth.htm; Healthy People 2010: Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Health; Mental Health Risk Factors among GLBT Youth, National Alliance on Mental Illness 2007; Creating Supportive Policies for LGBT Youth, NASMHPD 2012