

Mapping the journeys of LGBTIQ people experiencing family violence

Early insights from people
with lived experience

May 2018



Introduction

The LGBTI Family Violence Pathways Mapping project has been initiated by Family Safety Victoria's (FSV's) Diversity, Engagement and Strategy Branch to develop a better understanding of the pathways of LGBTI people who experience family violence through the current family violence service system.

The project involves two workshops:

- the first with LGBTI community members who have experienced family violence
- the second with LGBTI stakeholders, family violence service sector representatives and government stakeholders.


The Australian Centre for Social Innovation has been engaged by FSV to design and facilitate both workshops, analyse content from the sessions and develop outputs for use afterward.

The project aims to develop a shared understanding across the sector of barriers and service gaps for people in LGBTI communities. The outcomes of the project will help inform policy direction and projects to support LGBTI people experiencing family violence.

This document is a report from the first workshop, held with LGBTI people with lived experience of family violence who are now working in the area of family violence. The Victorian Government's Victim Survivors' Advisory Council also contributed to this report.

Many thanks to those who participated in workshop one and/or contributed to this report, and also to Drummond Street Services and the Victorian AIDS Council for supporting the workshop.

The willingness of LGBTI people with lived experience of family violence to share their stories helps us have a greater understanding of some of the main barriers and challenges for LGBTI people experiencing family violence, and supports us to keep working to improve the system for others in the future.



We are at a phenomenally important time in the history of designing future strategies to prevent and minimise the harm from Family Violence [for LGBTIQ people].

Emerging insight into the experience of accessing support

1. 'There is no system'

Many LGBTIQ people experiencing family violence feel that there is no family violence system that is accessible to, or inclusive of, them. While they experience family violence at similar or higher rates to non-LGBTIQ people, the experience of LGBTIQ people is largely invisible within mainstream responses. The new LGBTIQ integrated services model is the first specialist service to fill this gap but is still in its infancy and facing the challenge of establishing safe networks or bridges to the mainstream service system.

4. Gut Feeling

For many, the first step toward help is validating and acknowledging the 'gut feeling' that something is not quite right. This gut feeling can be suppressed or difficult to trust though given the mainstream understanding of family violence as occurring in heterosexual, cisgendered relationships.

7. Help-seeking Risks

Seeking knowledge or assistance can trigger more violence:

- Escalating a partner's control
- Violence or homo/bi/transphobia from service sector
- Backlash from community or close family networks

2. Community Strength

For many, personal resilience and the support of LGBTIQ community members has become the substitute or proxy for what many experience as a non-existent service system. Support and safety is largely provided by trusted community networks rather than professionals. Creating safe social circles is an essential first step for validation, taking action, supplementing or replacing the mainstream service sector, and ongoing safety. Awareness of family violence within LGBTIQ communities is growing but is still limited by mainstream understandings of family violence as occurring in heterosexual, cisgendered relationships.

5. That One Person

LGBTIQ people experiencing family violence are battling ongoing discrimination and self doubt in relation to whether their experience amounts to family violence. Many have expressed the value of just one person who helped them to validate their experience and know that it's not their fault. Without this, people may remain in a state of confusion and are at risk of staying within a violent situation. LGBTIQ professionals with lived experience were named as a most helpful support.

8. Structural Violence

Many LGBTIQ people experience additional violence or re-abuse by the system when seeking or accessing professional help:

- Trans/homo/biphobia
- Being misgendered
- Made to feel it's their fault or that they're the perpetrator
- Minimisation of violence
- No offers of help or workers being dismissive of their experiences

3. Entry Points

System entry points do exist, but many professionals lack an awareness of what family violence against LGBTIQ people looks like and what referral pathways there are that are inclusive, informed and safe. LGBTIQ people are having contact with: counsellors, medical professionals and general practitioners, workplaces, schools, spiritual centres, and mainstream general services.

6. Help-seeking Hesitation

There's a hesitancy to seek or access professional help for many reasons. Many people:

- Don't know that help is available (or it may not be available)
- Don't know where to find help
- Are aware that there is an absence of LGBTIQ-inclusive services
- Don't see themselves in the mainstream family violence response system
- Fear discrimination by the sector, backlash from community members or ostracisation from their community
- Don't feel worthy of receiving help

Key Factors

to accessing and benefiting from help

Barriers in accessing help

- Failing to recognising their experience as family violence due to the invisibility of LGBTIQ people in family violence discourse
- Lack of LGBTIQ-specific or inclusive services
- Not knowing what LGBTIQ-safe supports are available
- Having to fit into binary service access criteria
- Being misgendered and therefore receiving inappropriate referrals or being disrespected
- The dismissal (by professionals) of a victim's experience of intimate partner violence as mutual

What works

- Safety in a service and safety at home
- People who understand the nature of violence within an LGBTIQ context
- Support to recover from trauma
- People who validate LGBTIQ people's experiences of family violence
- People you can trust

Voices of what the support system has been like

Medical professionals – especially in the ‘trans specific’ medical sphere – play God and use their power to control our lives and bodies.

There is no ‘after’ [experiencing family violence]. It’s there forever. I’m still so angry, but I’m working on it.

Family Violence doesn't discriminate. LGBTIQ people aren't immune.

What was going through my head? Make it work or die.

There was one counselor who met me where I was, validated me and my experience, understood what it meant to be LGBTIQ and that made all the difference.

Everything I did to survive. I’m proud of myself for that and my acts of resistance.

Sometimes it feels like there’s nothing for me. My experience is so poorly understood.

Coming in contact with the system and seeking help

4 Contact Pathways

Conversations with LGBTIQ people with lived experience highlighted that there are four key ways LGBTIQ people who are experiencing family violence might come in contact with supports.

1. Outside the system

People seek help outside of the family violence service system, often with the support of community and from a counselor.

2. Point of crisis

People access family violence supports as a result of receiving a lateral support during a point of crisis (e.g. mental health, alcohol and other drugs, homelessness).

There are a number of ways in which LGBTIQ people come in contact with a system actor who could be a first point of entry. These points of contact vary in their helpfulness for victim survivors often depending on the professional's understanding of family violence and within the LGBTIQ context. Although currently underutilised effectively, each could become opportunity areas to offer support to people in need.

3. System support

(identity not disclosed)
People access the family violence service system but don't reveal their gender, sexuality or intersex status for fear of discrimination or prejudice.

4. System support

(identity disclosed)
People seek to access family violence supports but frequently encounter gaps in service provision, exclusion or lack of informed support due to their gender, sexuality or biological sex characteristics.

1. Mainstream services for IPV/FV
2. General services (e.g. Centrelink)
3. Counsellors and therapists
4. Doctors and medical health professionals
5. 'Trans - specific' health and medical professionals
6. Alternative healing therapists
7. Workplaces
8. Schools
9. Queer friendly services and supports
10. Spiritual centres and organisations

It's worth noting that some people do not seek or receive help from the system or community. These people experience continued abuse and family violence.

The following pages map what helps and hinders LGBTIQ people who are seeking support as well as the feelings and thoughts people experience throughout their help seeking and recovery journey. The content represents a collection of real, de-identified stories shared generously by LGBTIQ people with lived experience of family violence.

These maps include the aggregated experiences, thoughts, and reflections of people across the 4 contact pathways named previously.

Many experiences detailed here overlap with the experiences of many people experiencing family violence, however these challenges are amplified by the lack of inclusive or informed services for LGBTIQ communities, and/or the structural violence that many LGBTIQ people experience.

The map highlights 3 levels of responses that can help or hinder someone accessing support:

1. Service sector
2. Community
3. Individual.

You'll notice that the majority of barriers are experienced at the system level and people currently find help within the LGBTIQ community.



Journey Map Key

(next page)



Key Stages

Need occurs

A gut feeling

Trusted external inputs

Realise that things aren't right

Searching & evaluating options

Making a decision to do or tell

Thoughts & Feelings

Is this my fault? Is what I think is happening actually happening?**Is this just what being LGBTIQ is like?**

Self blame. Denial.

I've fought hard for this. **I have to show that my relationship is equal to heteronormative relationships;** I have to make it work.

Shame and fear.

Am I worthy of something different? Is this real? **Is this what queer relationships are supposed to be like?**

Fear of life and living.

Is it actually possible to end this? Is what happened to me enough to get help?

Courage.

Where are the queer services? I don't see myself in this service...

Fear and loneliness.

Will anyone believe me? Do I deserve help? Did I make the wrong decision? Have I made all of this up?

Anger.

What helps

Gaining more self awareness about yourself, your boundaries, your needs and agency

Talking to someone who hears you and doesn't shut you down or minimise your experience.

Support from and conversations with the LGBTIQ community.

Asking for help

Learning about LGBTIQ relationships and queer contexts to understand what's 'normal' and what's not.

Queering the definitions and using inclusive language.

What hinders

Normalisation of violence within LGBTIQ relationships and general disassociation from trying to support or intervene.

Not knowing you deserve better.

Discussion of violence and understanding of violence is through a binary gendered lens.

Normalisation of violence and a lack of understanding or defining intimate partner violence.

Not having strong support networks or friends outside of relationships or family (who may be the perpetrators of violence).

Not being out to family or friends.

Experiencing multiple levels or areas of abuse (e.g. both family and a partner)

Continued abuse or violence — not knowing there are other options

Messages about where or how to seek or access help are not as visible to the LGBTIQ communities

Services are women focussed which excludes men and others on the gender spectrum.

Few LGBTIQ-specific Services.

Not being believed. Not being validated.

Not seeing people like yourself within the 'system of help' it feels foreign and unsafe.

Staff assuming all men are perpetrators or women cannot be perpetrators

Limited or no safe options to refer to or seek support. No policy requirements to include LGBTIQ people.

Active denial of service access.

Hard to link into a service when you're not already in a service.

Heteronormativity is violent.

The more intersectionality someone has the more marginalised they become because the system doesn't know where to place them.

Social isolation; losing close support networks

Key Stages

Telling someone

Waiting

First encounter with a support

Using a support

Preparing to transition out

Ongoing recovery and education

This is like a **double/triple coming out**. I don't trust anyone. I should have tried harder, now I'll be alone.

Stronger.

How do I manage work, trauma, finances, and the situation? **Will I ever find new friends and family who respect me?**

Depression. Shame.

These people don't understand me, but it's my only option. Am I the perpetrator? Am I crazy?

Suicidal thoughts

Who represents me and people like me? Why are they using such a heteronormative way of thinking?

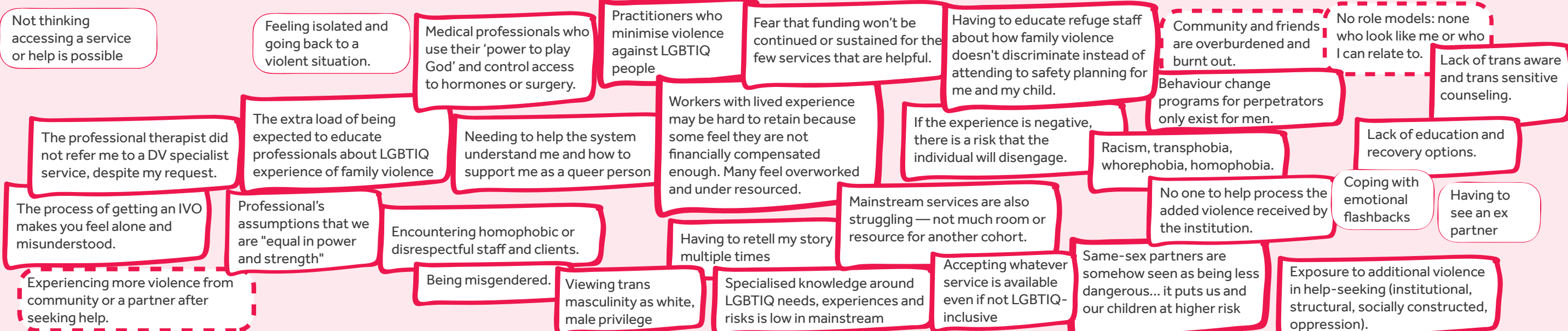
Shame in not knowing how we will be received.

How will my community react? Will there be backlash? D

Have the will to live.

This is forever. I'm proud of where I got to, but I'm still angry.

Healing. Doubt.



Thoughts & Feelings

What helps

What hinders