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## **Physiological impacts of homophobia**

*Concordia study finds link between self acceptance, stress hormones and bullying*

**Montreal, February 2, 2011** - Young adults who are lesbian, gay or bisexual (LGB) are at far higher risk for severe mental health problems than their heterosexual peers. New research from Concordia University suggests that the stress of being rejected or victimized because of sexual orientation may disrupt hormonal responses in lesbians, gays and bisexuals.

Recently published as a doctoral thesis in clinical psychology, this investigation examined environmental risks and protective factors that counterbalanced them in LGB youth. "Compared to their heterosexual peers, suicide rates are up to 14 times higher among lesbian, gay and bisexual high school and college students," says Michael Benibgui, who led this investigation as part of his PhD thesis at Concordia's Department of Psychology and Centre for Research in Human Development.

"Depression and anxiety are widespread," he continues. "To learn why this occurs, we studied the physiological impact of homophobic social environments on a group of healthy young LGB adults."

### **Self loathing, stress hormones and bullying linked**

The study examined the link between living in a homophobic environment and 'internalized homophobia,' e.g., feeling negatively about oneself because of one's sexual identity as LGB.

Individuals who experienced more LGB-related stress – arguments about sexual identity, bullying or discrimination – had higher internalized homophobia and showed increased production of the stress hormone cortisol compared to peers in more positive environments.

What's more, LGB youth who showed more internalized homophobia and abnormal cortisol activity also experienced increased symptoms of depression, anxiety and suicidal thoughts. "This study is among the first to clearly link the experience of homophobia with abnormal cortisol activity," says Benibgui.

Benibgui says abnormal cortisol activity in LGB youth, combined with the vicious cycle of stress, could be further influenced by a complex set of biological, psychological and social factors. "This study shows a clear relation between abnormal cortisol levels and environmental stressors related to homophobia," he says.

### **Protective factors of social networks**

Benibgui also identified protective factors that can help safeguard mental health in young gays, lesbians and bisexuals. His research confirms that social support from parents and peers have protective effects. “LGB young adults who experienced more homophobic discrimination, yet felt accepted and supported by their peers, showed very few symptoms of depression,” he says.

These findings underline the impact – both physical and mental – that homophobia may have on LGB young adults. “The effect on mental health of bullying in schools has received much attention,” says Benibgui. “Our study supports the notion that homophobic bullying can lead to physical and mental health problems.”

Preventative interventions are needed to protect vulnerable lesbian, gay or bisexual youth, Benibgui stresses, to discourage homophobic and heterosexist behaviors from peers and communities.

Paul Hastings, a former Concordia psychology professor who supervised Benibgui’s thesis research, says that this study should push the conversation about the impact of homophobia.

“This study is one part of a much larger and greatly needed dialogue on the impacts that prejudice, discrimination and victimization have on healthy development and well-being in young people,” says Dr. Hastings, an international member of the Centre for Research in Human Development and now a professor at the University of California Davis. “We need to promote acceptance and respect for the diversity of our population – including sexual diversity – at all levels: government, community, schools and homes.”

### **About the Study:**

“Mental Health Challenges and Resilience in Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual Young Adults: Biological and Psychological Internalization of Minority Stress and Victimization,” was authored by Michael Benibgui, Ph.D., as his doctoral dissertation in clinical psychology at Concordia University. Professor Paul Hastings, Ph.D., now at University of California Davis, was project supervisor.

### **Related links:**

- Cited research: <http://gradworks.umi.com/NR/67/NR67340.html>
- Concordia Department of Psychology: <http://psychology.concordia.ca>
- Centre for Research in Human Development: <http://crdh.concordia.ca>
- Concordia’s YouTube stand against homophobic bullying: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jSCK4LmEic4>
- Concordia University: [www.concordia.ca](http://www.concordia.ca)
- University of California Davis: [www.ucdavis.edu](http://www.ucdavis.edu)

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### **Abstract:**

This study was a novel exploration of psycho-social and neuroendocrine factors that may contribute to mental health in LGB youth and young adults. Research suggests that, compared to their heterosexual peers, LGB youth and young adults report alarmingly elevated rates of depression, anxiety, suicidal ideation and attempts, and lower self-esteem in concert with a much higher incidence of victimization from family and peer-groups. Homophobic societal attitudes compounded with discrimination, marginalization, stigma, and victimization experienced by LGB individuals are thought to contribute to the development of internalized homonegativity (IH) and psychological distress. Research also suggests that victimization and social stressors can dysregulate cortisol activity, leading to increased risk for mood disorders. The main goal of the present study was to investigate the interplay of bio-psycho-social factors that are thought to contribute to positive and negative indices of mental health in a community sample of 63 LGB young adults in Montreal, Canada. Dysregulated diurnal cortisol activity and internalized homonegativity were postulated to function either as mediators or as moderators of the links between parental support, social support and LGB-related stress on the one hand, and depression, anxiety, suicidality and self esteem on the other.

LGB young adults experiencing more LGB-related stress had more depressive symptoms and lower self-esteem. Interaction effects with parental and social support were also found. IH and cortisol were both positively correlated with LGB-related stress. IH and cortisol slope jointly predicted depression, but each uniquely predicted the other measures of mental health. LGB young adults experiencing varying levels of IH benefited from different social relationships. Cortisol slope also moderated the relations between support, victimization and mental health. These results are particularly striking given the overall high-level of mental-health of this particular sample.

The findings of this study were in accord with diathesis-stress models of mental health. Implications for understanding the bio-psycho-social basis of mental health and promoting the well-being of LGB young adults were considered, as were limitations imposed by the sample and methodology.

Advisor: School: [CONCORDIA UNIVERSITY](#) Source: DAI-B 71/12, p. , Jun 2011  
Source Type: Ph.D. Subjects: [GLBT Studies](#); [Clinical psychology](#); [Physiological psychology](#) Publication Number: NR67340