

Study shows links between youth distress and stigma around sexual orientation

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Imagine having feelings of distress and negativity at some point as you are going about your day. Then imagine feeling that way every day, for almost 21 days. Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer youth

don't have to imagine having negative feelings at some point throughout the day for an extended period of days. A new study from American University reveals just how pervasive emotional distress is related to stigma around sexual orientation.

"Although we know that LGBTQ [youth](#) experience bullying, discrimination, and microaggressions during adolescence, we don't know how prevalent these experiences are in their day-to-day lives," said lead study author, licensed psychologist and American University Health Studies Prof. Ethan Mereish.

"Our study shows that LGBTQ youth experience stresses related to their multiple stigmatized identities almost daily, and sexual orientation-specific [stressors](#) on a weekly basis. These experiences are associated with greater negative emotions that can lead to depression or other mental health issues."

Researchers have long known that [minority](#) stressors harm LGBTQ youth. However, what is less understood is their daily effects and youth resilience and well-being in the face of stigma. Minority stressors range from hearing homophobic, transphobic or racist remarks to more severe stressors such as experiencing discrimination, prejudice and harassment directly related to one's sexual orientation or [gender identities](#).

Could the pervasiveness of negative emotions lead to more serious mental health issues? LGBTQ youth are at greater risk for poor mental health outcomes, including depression, compared with their heterosexual and cisgender peers. "Having negative emotions does not necessarily make one clinically depressed; however, if they persist over several days and weeks, it could become depression," Mereish said.

For the study, nearly 100 racially diverse youth and adolescents between the ages of 12 to 18 were recruited from the Washington, D.C. LGBTQ

community, with the greatest number of participants attending high school. The participants filled out a daily diary, which consisted of responding to daily surveys. Every day for 21 days, participants received a link to a survey that asked about their experiences in the last 24 hours to gauge their level of distress around minority stressors. The questions asked about their experiences with discrimination, prejudice, harassment and rejection. Participants also completed a psychological questionnaire as a baseline measure.

According to the study results, the participants experienced an average of 17 minority stressors during the 21-day monitoring period, and some participants experienced even more. Most participants attributed these stressors to their sexual orientation. Some minority stressors were more commonly experienced than others such as seeing or hearing negative or offensive messages; being made to feel uncomfortable or unsafe because of one's identity; experiencing one's identity to interfere with their life; and being misunderstood.

On days when participants experienced a greater number of minority stressors, they reported higher same-day negative emotions, or "negative affect," a medical term that refers to moods and emotional states. Additionally, the youth experienced heightened negative affect on days when they experienced a [sexual orientation](#)-specific minority stressor. A similar association between minority stressors and negative emotions was found on days when stressors occurred related to other identities, such as their gender or race.

The study models similar research done in adults, which also confirm a link between the daily stressors of being a sexual minority and negative emotions. The youth study differs for its diverse sample (both in race and gender identity diversity), and the implications, as youth and adolescents are developing, and interventions will be different, Mereish notes.

More information: Ethan H. Mereish et al, A daily diary study of minority stress and negative and positive affect among racially diverse sexual minority adolescents, *Journal of Counseling Psychology* (2021). DOI: [10.1037/cou0000556](https://doi.org/10.1037/cou0000556)

Provided by American University

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