

TIPS FOR ONLINE SPACES

- Get familiar with the technological landscape that your clients are already in. You could ask them what sites they visit or apps they use, as this may give insight into the social worlds they are comfortable with.
- Technology is constantly emerging and changing. While you probably can't keep up with every new trend, app or website, allow yourself to be educated by your clients about how and when they use technology and don't be afraid to have a go yourself.
- Encourage clients who are feeling socially isolated or alone to investigate what kinds of support or information are available to them online.
- Mainstream sites like YouTube and Reddit can offer ways to learn from other people's experiences or to gather information about what they are going through themselves. There is a range of LGBTI content on sites such as these, as well as a wealth of mental health specific resources for LGBTI people.

- If your client is already engaging in online contact or if you're encouraging them to do so, it's important to keep safety in mind. Some useful principles to remember are; anonymity, using technology at appropriate times, maintaining a healthy balance with online spaces and real life contact.
- For young people in particular, it's important to emphasise that once information is online, it's very hard to get back.
- Identifying information like full names, locations and credit card details should, of course, never be shared in an open online environment and clients should be invited to think about the consequences of these or other personal details becoming public.

ONLINE ENVIRONMENTS

A QLIFE GUIDE FOR HEALTH PROFESSIONALS

The emergence of the internet as a major part of daily life is swiftly changing avenues of social connection, access to information, doing business and accessing health care services.



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ONLINE SPACES AS SOCIAL SPACES DIGITAL COMMUNITIES

While social media like Facebook, meet up apps and other examples of digital interaction provide excellent ways for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTI) people to connect, the online environment can also be problematic.

Being part of active and satisfying networks and forming connections with peers are important aspects of maintaining wellness for most people and this can be especially true for LGBTI people. Finding others who identify as LGBTI and/or share common experiences has typically required the confidence to seek out people at social groups, support groups, pubs or events, special-interest clubs, or through personal ads. The emergence of the internet and the increased accessibility through phones, tablets and computers has changed the way that many people receive information, access services and interact with other LGBTI people.

Social media, discussion pages, online chat services and multi-user gaming environments can all provide safe spaces for LGBTI people to seek support and social connections with others who share their experiences, without requiring them to be visible or physically present. These environments also give the user spaces to explore their feelings without fear of being found out. There is a certain level of anonymity found in online space and this can help facilitate people to feel comfortable being open about whom they are. Online and gaming environments can also provide communities which overcome geographic barriers and create more exchange about experiences between people in different parts of the world. The variation of such spaces is almost endless and growing daily.

DIGITAL COMMUNITIES

Digital communities are expanding in the number of users and also in the type of communities. Social media such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram and LGBTI-themed apps and dating websites like Grindr and Pink Sofa are now used by huge numbers of people around the world on a regular basis. An ever-expanding range of specialised LGBTI websites cater to varying interests and can involve elements of entertainment, news and commentary, education about sex and bodies as well as interaction via forums and chatrooms. All of these platforms and communities provide spaces to connect and explore aspects of oneself and wider communities.

Computer and video games have also become sites for gender and sexuality formation, exploration of individual identity and acceptance of diversity. Game developers are now commonly creating storylines and characters relevant to LGB people's experiences and some games also allow for experimenting with gender expression. For instance, players can choose characters that have different gender presentations in-game than they have in their everyday life as a way to explore and experience how people may treat them according to how they might like to be in real life. Several online simulation games now offer the flexibility to explore same-gender and polyamorous relationships between characters or avatars.

TECHNOLOGY AND ACCEPTANCE OF LGBTI PEOPLE

Using technology to facilitate connection is highlighting generational differences in attitudes of acceptance towards LGBTI people. People under 30 have typically grown into adulthood alongside internet-based technologies and are likely exposed to the experiences of LGBTI people in online spaces as they develop. In many opinion polls, often designed to gauge societal acceptance of marriage equality, younger generations of Australians have markedly different levels of acceptance for LGBTI people than older generations and are beginning to view differences in sexuality, gender and bodily experiences and expression as less of a concern. This suggests positive trends that may indicate that prejudice towards LGBTI people is declining.

ONLINE SAFETY

Online spaces can be positive; however, people need to remain cautious when interacting and sharing information. It can be easy for people to think of the internet as a private and discreet environment for communication but it is increasingly evident that information or images can be shared in many ways that are not originally intended, and difficult to retrieve or delete. People online or in gaming environments can pretend to be someone else which can be problematic, especially if people have extended trust to others based on what feels like a peer connection. This is especially true for people who may be using the internet to explore their sexuality or to connect sexually with others using images or webcams.

The emergence of the internet and accessibility through phones, tablets and computers has changed the way many people receive information, access services and interact with other LGBTI people.

Existing social problems can be exacerbated by the possibilities of connection at any time and place. For instance, bullying used to be confined to face-to-face environments but now, the rise of social media via mobile technology allows for bullying to happen anywhere and anytime, rarely giving people an escape

or reprieve, and it is very difficult to control how widely something can be disseminated. This is especially worrying for young LGBTI people who may be targeted for bullying because either their gender or sexuality or both are seen as a target of ridicule and abuse. This can also apply for adults particularly in a workplace bullying context or where personal incidents or relationship breakdowns are taken into a more public online arena.

LONELINESS AND ISOLATION

Interaction via technology has become an unquestioned part of life. The decline and dispersion of known gathering spaces means that interaction via technology will probably continue growing in importance in LGBTI people's lives. This presents emerging problems for people that do not have good access to technology or to people who feel that face-to-face interactions are more comfortable for them. The paradox of instantly available online connection is that many LGBTI people report loneliness and isolation in the midst of this. Loneliness and isolation may be helped in some people's lives by technological changes, however this leaves other LGBTI people without spaces to explore or to find similar experiences, resulting in increased isolation.



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