

# A Mental Health Recovery and Community Integration Guide for LGBTQIA+ Individuals:

## What You Need to Know



National Alliance on Mental Illness

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*“Recovery happened when I began naming it, claiming it, taming it, and framing it.”*

**Mark A. Davis**  
Founder, *Pink & Blues*



The National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) is the nation's largest grassroots mental health organization dedicated to improving the lives of individuals and families affected by mental illness.

NAMI has over 1,100 affiliates in communities across the country who engage in advocacy, research, support, and education.

[www.nami.org](http://www.nami.org)



The Temple University Collaborative on Community Inclusion, funded by the National Institute on Disability and Rehabilitation Research, is a rehabilitation research and training center devoted to promoting community inclusion for individuals with psychiatric disabilities. The Collaborative, based at Temple University is conducted in partnership with The Clearinghouse at the Mental Health Association of Southeastern Pennsylvania and Horizon House, Inc. [www.tucollaborative.org](http://www.tucollaborative.org)

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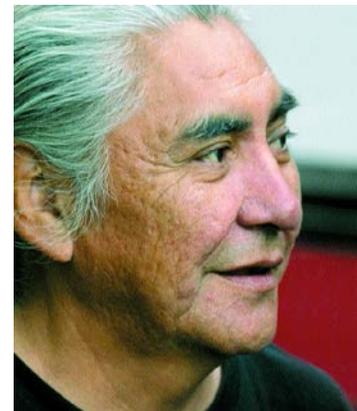
## A Mental Health Recovery and Community Integration Guide for LGBTQIA+ Individuals

### Do you have a mental illness?

If you answer “yes” to this question, you may have many other questions, such as:

- \* *Am I going to be OK?*
- \* *Where do I go for help?*
- \* *Will my sexual orientation or gender identity affect the way I am treated when I seek help?*
- \* *What are the issues that may impact my recovery?*

This publication is designed to help answer these and other important questions of people who are gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, questioning, or intersex (GLBTQI) and are also seeking help with a mental illness. In this booklet, you will find information on the services available to ensure that GLBTQI individuals diagnosed with a mental illness have access to the



same sensitivity and quality of services as anyone else.

While a mental illness diagnosis may seem overwhelming at first, rest assured, there is **hope**. With an accurate diagnosis, effective treatment, attention to health and wellness, and support from loved ones, most people with a serious mental illness, such as major depression, schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, and anxiety disorders, can experience relief from their symptoms and lead satisfying and meaningful lives as valued members of their community.

**Recovery and community integration is possible. You are not alone in this journey.**

## BASIC FACTS:

- \* Mental illnesses are medical conditions that cause changes in a person's thinking, feeling, mood, ability to relate to others, and daily functioning, which can make coping with the ordinary demands of life difficult.
- \* These illnesses are common—one in four adults experience a mental health disorder in a given year—and, like many other common medical conditions, mental illnesses are treatable.
- \* Mental illnesses affect individuals regardless of their sexuality, gender, age, race/ethnicity, religion, or income.
- \* While identifying as GLBTQI is not mental illness in and of itself, research suggests that people who identify as GLBTQI are likely to be at higher risk for depression, anxiety, and substance use disorders.
- \* Mental illness is often stigmatized as so, too, can be identifying as gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, questioning or intersex. A GLBTQI person with mental illness may experience distress known as *double stigma*.

## Recovery and Community Integration

One of the most important things to understand about having a mental illness is that most people can and do recover and continue to lead meaningful lives. Recovery is a journey of healing and transformation enabling a person with a mental illness to live a meaningful life in the community while striving to achieve his or her full potential.

Accepting the illness and gathering information is often the first step. This can help minimize the negative impact of the illness. Acceptance, education, and information will allow you to create a stable approach to your life's challenges and opportunities. Recovery is personal and varies among individuals. There is no standard step-by-step process. A marker of progress in recovery may be feeling responsible for your own actions and moving on with your life.

Community integration is the opportunity to live in the community and be valued for one's uniqueness and abilities, like everyone else. It is a right to have the opportunity to participate as you choose in community life, a right that should not be diminished by a label of mental illness or GLBTQI. When managing a mental illness, there are key issues to consider for successful community participation, such as supportive personal relationships, employment, housing, and contributing to civic life.

*“Recovery is better than what I had.  
Recovery is a life-long process.  
Recovery is believing that I am  
somebody special.  
Recovery is HOPE!”*

**Anthony Holscher**  
Mentor, NAMI Peer-to-Peer

## Helpful Services for Recovery and Community Integration

The first priority once you are diagnosed with a serious mental illness is to make a decision that you wish to be on your own path of mental health recovery. For many, this begins by finding effective psychiatric care. However, since mental illness affects many aspects of life, you may need a wider array of services, such as help with employment, housing, finances, socialization, mutual support, education, and medical treatment.

Unfortunately, no single, coordinated system of services currently exists in the United States. A number of model programs have emerged to help people who are diagnosed with serious mental illness live healthy and meaningful lives; however, in many parts of the country these nonmedical services are fragmented and dif-



difficult to find and use. The situation often worsens for GLBTQI individuals with mental illness as they often experience limited access to mental health services, may encounter an unwelcoming environment in mental health programs, and often receive inadequate rehabilitation and clinical care.

The most effective community service programs build on individual strengths, involve the individual's culture and identity, provide a sense of belonging, emphasize the possibility of work and personal growth, and are driven by the particular needs and preferences of each person.

### Useful Tip:

#### To find mental health services in your community, contact:

- \* Your state or county mental health department, found in the white pages of your phone book or on the Web, or
- \* Your NAMI state organization or local affiliate, found at [www.nami.org/local](http://www.nami.org/local), or
- \* The NAMI HelpLine at: **1 (800) 950-NAMI (6264)**

## Financial Support

It can be financially challenging to pay for mental health treatment and meet basic living expenses. Some public money is available to help meet these costs, although obtaining government benefits generally takes time and persistence.

People who cannot work because of a serious mental illness may be entitled to disability payments from the Supplemental Security Income, Social Security Disability Insurance, or General Public Assistance programs. Money for medical treatment may be available through Medicaid or Medicare. Be sure to find out if you are eligible for these kinds of assistance.

**If you are eligible for support, you are entitled to receive it.**

### Useful Tip:

- \* Find more information on the Web site of the **U.S. Social Security Administration** ([www.ssa.gov](http://www.ssa.gov)).
- \* Learn about the financial support available in your state and community—and how to apply for it—by contacting your **local Social Security Administration field office**.
- \* You may also find listings of local Medicaid and Medicare offices in your phone book or on the Web.



### Terms to Know:

- \* **Supplemental Security Income (SSI)** is a federal program to provide income to aging, visually impaired, and other disability populations. Eligibility is based on financial need and disability determination.
- \* **Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI)** is for workers with disabilities who have paid into the Social Security system through payroll deductions. Some individuals under age 22 with disabilities may collect SSDI under a parent's account if the parent is retired, disabled, or deceased.
- \* **General Public Assistance (GPA)** is available in some locations to those who have a disability and are either ineligible or waiting for other forms of assistance.
- \* **Medicare** is a federal health insurance program for those over age 65 and workers with disabilities.
- \* **Medicaid** is a state and federal health insurance program for those with low incomes. Eligibility varies from state to state.
- \* A **Representative Payee** is a family member, friend, or community advocate who receives a monthly SSI or SSDI check on behalf of the person diagnosed with a mental illness and helps him or her manage the money.

## Treatment and Rehabilitation

Many people living with serious mental illness need continuous, long-term support to manage their symptoms. It is important to find the right doctor and form of treatment to provide a sturdy foundation for symptom management. Many GLBTQI individuals do not access care or do not come out to their mental health providers because they fear discrimination and/or homophobia. While this is completely understandable, it is important to seek help.



In the past few decades, mental health professionals have shown a positive change in attitude toward GLBTQI populations. Try to find a mental health provider you can trust.

*“You may find help from professionals who identify as GLBTQI or from those who do not, but are welcoming to GLBTQI people. I’ve worked with professionals from both communities successfully, so I know it can be done. You just need to advocate for yourself and ask the right questions – you will find both help and hope.”*

**Ann Wroth**  
NAMI National

### Tips for Finding a GLBTQI-Friendly Health Care Provider:

- \* **Ask for referrals.** Talk to your peers or visit your local GLBTQI community center. You could also check the Web sites for the Association of Gay and Lesbian Psychiatrists: [www.aglp.org](http://www.aglp.org) or the Gay and Lesbian Medical Association: [www.glma.org](http://www.glma.org).
- \* **Call and ask questions.** Ask health care providers if they have any GLBTQI patients, if they have received any GLBTQI cultural competence training, and if they provide a safe space for GLBTQI individuals.
- \* **Assess the health care provider.** Did he seem at ease with you? Did she talk openly about your sexuality or gender identity? Did you feel comfortable? Could have an open discussion?

**Many treatments exist for people living with mental illness.** These can include medication as prescribed and monitored by a psychiatrist, a primary care physician or a nurse. Other forms of treatment also promote recovery and prevent crises. While many of these treatments are widely available, some services vary from state to state:

**Psychosocial Treatments** are empirically supported interventions, such as interpersonal therapy or cognitive-behavioral therapy, that can be effective as an alternative or in combination with medication treatment.

**Peer Support and Education** is a model that emphasizes the importance of learning from someone who has experienced mental illness and can provide valuable advice, such as how to navigate the mental health care system and how to manage your illness. Peer programs also offer helpful social networking opportunities. Examples of peer education and support programs are:

- \* **NAMI Peer-to-Peer** is a free nine-week course that provides information on prevention planning and debriefing/storytelling, and an advance directive for psychiatric care. [www.nami.org/p2p](http://www.nami.org/p2p)
- \* **NAMI Connection** is a free weekly recovery support group program in which people living with mental illness learn from each other’s experiences, share coping strategies, and offer each other encouragement and understanding. [www.nami.org/connection](http://www.nami.org/connection)

**Psychosocial Rehabilitation Programs** provide a variety of services, such as vocational training, social and recreational programs, and personal support for independent living.

**Self-help practices** such as getting adequate physical exercise, rest, nutrition, yoga, meditation, and listening to meaningful music are important to recovery.

For more information on specific illnesses and medications, visit [www.nami.org](http://www.nami.org) or call: 1 - 800 - 950 - NAMI (6264).



**Crisis Intervention Services** provide emergency help to people in a psychiatric crisis. Depending on the severity of the crisis, services may include telephone support; home visits; crisis residence; transportation to and from the hospital; and coordination with hospital staff in admission, discharge, and treatment.



## Terms to Know:

- \* **Community Mental Health Centers** are local facilities offering outpatient treatment and emergency services for people living with mental illness. These are often funded by state and federal government and may also provide services and information for families.
- \* **Case Management** is a service, usually provided by public mental health centers, that coordinates treatment, services, and supports. A caseworker can be a helpful ally in your recovery and community integration process, providing information on where to go for help and advice on what services to utilize.

## Housing

Living in a clean, safe, and supportive environment is a key component of recovery and community integration. Optimal mental health service-based housing is flexible, individualized, and accessible, meaning that your living environment is supportive of your recovery and provides opportunities to get involved in your community. This promotes positive quality of life through social, volunteer, and employment opportunities.

An array of supported housing options may be available in your community, such as supervised group homes, supervised apartments, independent supported housing, and Section 8 housing (federally subsidized, low income). Public funding may be available to help you or your family meet the cost of supportive housing, but, again, be aware that obtaining government benefits takes time and persistence.



## Useful Tip:

**To learn about available housing options, costs, and application information, contact the following:**

- \* The housing coordinator at your local community mental health center.
- \* Your local office of the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development [www.hud.gov](http://www.hud.gov).
- \* Your NAMI state organization or local affiliate [www.nami.org/local](http://www.nami.org/local).

You may need to explore your housing options further to determine which is best for you. Anticipate that individuals with mental illness who identify as GLBTQI may face negative experiences in housing arrangements, such as being asked to hide their sexual orientation or identity, having that identity undesirably broadcast in a group home, or interacting with insensitive residential staff. A local GLBTQI community center or other similar GLBTQI-supportive agency may provide you with key information to determine whether a housing option can meet personal needs related to your sexuality and/or gender identity.

## Employment

Being a part of the workforce is an important way to be involved in your community and, for individuals with mental illness, meaningful work is vital to the recovery path. You may need support performing the job you already have, a position with a lower level of stress than you have previously handled, or a new career altogether. Many individuals face a gap in employment history due to an illness. If your identity has changed, gender transitions may also affect work history, rendering it obsolete if you no longer wish to be known by the same name or if you would rather not disclose the reason your name has changed. Working with an assistance program can facilitate overcoming the obstacles of gaining meaningful employment.

Many individuals with mental illness hold more than one competitive job before finding one that is optimal for them. Research suggests that when jobs match preferences and capabilities and ongoing assistance is provided by a supported employment team, case managers, family members, and peers, individuals with mental illness are more capable of keeping jobs over a longer period of time.

### Useful Tip:

- \* Employment support programs can be found in a variety of service contexts, including community mental health centers and psychosocial rehabilitation agencies. Vocational services are often a part of programs that can provide support for individuals in need of transitional employment or re-entering the mainstream work force.
- \* Make sure that employment specialists understand your individual needs and work preferences.
- \* The level of success in your employment may be heightened if you can find meaningful work in a supportive environment. Learn about the equal opportunity policies of your potential employer and whether or not they receive any GLBTQI cultural competence or mental health awareness training.

## Socialization and Peer Support

The acceptance and understanding of friends and loved ones is one of the most important factors in recovery and community integration. Just when you need reassurance, companionship, and the emotional strength provided by a social network the most, your mental illness can interfere with your ability to maintain these relationships. Many GLBTQI individuals with mental illness have experienced in great frustration that their mental illness is not accepted in the GLBTQI community, and their identity as GLBTQI is not accepted in the mental health community.



Prepare yourself for this and surround yourself with caring friends and family to help support you on your path to recovery and community integration. Some individuals may have to create a more supportive family of choice if their biological family is not supportive of either being GLBTQI or having a mental illness.

Provide your friends and family with information on what you are going through and, if possible, involve them in your recovery process by bringing them along to treatment programs and other activities related to your recovery. NAMI's *Family-to-Family* program ([www.nami.org/f2f](http://www.nami.org/f2f)) is a free 12-week course that can provide valuable information on mental illness for your family members, including your spouse or partner.

If you are feeling isolated or lonely, educational, social, and recreational activities are available through programs developed specifically for individuals with mental illness. This will give you an opportunity to share coping strategies and serve as a social outlet.

- \* Online support groups and online networking may provide you with support from the comfort of your home computer.
- \* Clubhouse support programs provide social opportunities and peer advocacy in a community setting.
- \* Drop-in-centers offer support and socialization opportunities.
- \* Community mental health centers and psychosocial rehabilitation agencies in your area may also provide social and recreational programming.
- \* GLBTQI community centers may offer mental health programming or provide space for you to organize and hold support groups.

### Useful Tip:

- \* Your mental health treatment provider; GLBTQI-focused organizations like Parents, Families, and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG, [www.pflag.org](http://www.pflag.org)); and mental health organizations like NAMI may be good resources to help you identify available social and recreational supports in your area.

## Self-Help and Advocacy

You can play an active role in your own recovery and community integration journey. Remember you are the expert on your own needs; therefore, it is vital that you weigh in on treatment, recovery, and community integration service options. You can also offer your expertise by helping to build a more responsive and welcoming network of mental health services for GLBTQI individuals.



- \* **Take pride in your identity.** Accept yourself for who you are — an individual who deserves to live well as an equal and respected member of your community. Build support for welcoming programs and services by taking on a leadership role within your service programs.
- \* **Find and provide resources.** As you find helpful information and resources, share them with mental health agencies and programs in your area. This may help them better understand and serve the needs of GLBTQI individuals with mental illness. Share your story of recovery through programs like NAMI's *In Our Own Voice* program ([www.nami.org/ioov](http://www.nami.org/ioov)), which offers people with mental illness the opportunity to educate others about mental illness and recovery.
- \* **Become an advocate.** When navigating the system for yourself, you may find solutions to the barriers you face. Share these solutions with others to help drive change. You may want to play a stronger role in advocating for the development of policies, programs, and practices that create a more welcoming environment. A companion to this booklet, “GLBTQI Mental Health: Recommendations for Policies and Services”, may serve as an advocacy tool.
- \* **Set reasonable goals.** Remember, the mental health care system and many organizations and agencies are just starting to create changes needed for more GLBTQI-welcoming environments for people with mental illness. Set some reasonable goals for yourself, the people with whom you work, and for the agencies whose services you access. Even small progress can have a great effect.

### Useful Tip:

- \* Keep a journal of what works and does not work for you and refer to it along your journey.

## In Conclusion

Mental illnesses are common and can affect anyone. If you are diagnosed with a mental illness, seek answers to all the questions you have and seek treatment as soon as possible. It is important to arm yourself with the necessary information on your illness, access available supports and services, and take an active role in your recovery. You may face many bumps and unexpected turns on the road to recovery and community integration. Do not give up! You are not alone in this journey, and there are services and supports in place to help you.

## FURTHER RESOURCES

### ***GLBTQI Mental Health: Recommendations for Policies and Services***

an advocacy companion to this publication is available at:

[www.nami.org/glb](http://www.nami.org/glb)

### ***Handbook of LGBT Issues in Community Mental Health,***

Ed. Ronald E. Hellman, M.D., and Jack Drescher, M.D., Haworth Press, 2005

**The Rainbow Heights Club**, Brooklyn, NY: [www.rainbowheights.org](http://www.rainbowheights.org)

**Hearts & Ears, Inc.**, Baltimore, MD: [www.heartsandears.org](http://www.heartsandears.org)

**National Coalition for LGBT Health:** [www.lgbthealth.net](http://www.lgbthealth.net)

**GLBT Help Line:** (for all ages, lines open 6pm-11pm EST)

(888) 340 - 4528

**LGBT Suicide Prevention Hotline:**

(800) 850 - 8078

[www.TheTrevorProject.org](http://www.TheTrevorProject.org)

**LGBT Youth Peer Listening Line:** (lines open 5pm-11pm EST)

(800) 399 - PEER (7337)

**National Alliance on Mental Illness HelpLine:**

(800) 950 - NAMI (6264)

[www.nami.org](http://www.nami.org)