



LGBTQIA + Health

WEBINAR REPORT: ONLINE MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORT FOR LGBTQI+

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INTRODUCTION

On the 21st of September 2021, **Dennis van Wanrooij** (KIT Royal Tropical Institute, LGBTI health CoP member) moderated a live-interview about online mental health counselling for LGBTIQ+ people with **Leow Yangfa** (Executive Director at Oogachaga), **Jennifer de Lange** (PhD candidate at University of Groningen), **Mathijs Lucassen** (Senior lecturer in the School of Health, Wellbeing and Social Care at the Open University) and **Freya Terpstra** (Coordinator for the online platform Genderpraatjes at Transgender Netwerk Nederland TNN).

This event was organised by the **Share-Net Netherlands' Community of Practice (CoP) on LGBTI health** who aims to improve the health and rights of LGBTI people and communities by strengthening the knowledge and capacities of professionals. One of the activities to achieve this goal in 2021 was through this thematic meeting on Lessons learned from online mental health support for LGBTIQ initiated by **Lingga Tri Utama** (ResultsinHealth, LGBTI health CoP member) after his involvement with the CoP's last year's virtual meeting on mental health and LGBTI.

Speakers:



Jennifer de Lange, PhD candidate at University of Groningen



Freya Terpstra, Coordinator for the online platform Genderpraatjes at Transgender Netwerk Nederland TNNs



Leow Yangfa, Executive Director at Oogachaga



Mathijs Lucassen, Senior lecturer in the School of Health, Wellbeing and Social Care at the Open University

Moderator:



Dennis van Wanrooij, KIT Royal Tropical Institute, LGBTI health CoP member

WHY ONLINE SERVICES FOR LGBTI+ INDIVIDUALS?

During the event, the speakers shared their experiences in providing online support for LGBTIQ with mental health issues and doing research projects on the topic. Some projects are specifically targeting LGBTIQ young people because online space is seen as their safe space to find information and to get the support they need. It provides anonymity and it doesn't require them to talk to their parents or to general practitioners (GP) before they access the services. On the other hand, LGBTIQ adults are considered to be more independent, are easier to be reached, and most of them prefer to have in-person support as online is too much for them. Consequently, online services are not meant to replace offline and in-person services, instead they should complement each other, as both can serve different sub-population.

It is interesting to note that while online services can provide real time support for the community, this is not always what the community wants. Some prefer emailing and have more control on what they want to say. Having options for platforms that people can and prefer to use is important. In order to preserve security, it is also crucial to choose the right platforms and to set rules that can ensure the safety for both the clients and the providers.

WHAT ARE THE CHALLENGES?

The speakers also shared some challenges they have been facing in their work. At implementation level, the limitations of digital media are unavoidable. It is more difficult to gather more information about the clients, including their emotions during the session, especially when the services do not provide video facility. Because of the anonymity, following up the client is another challenge. At community level, while there is more and more online support provided for LGBTIQ, it seems that the services are still fragmented. At higher level, there is a concern about development funding, including from the Dutch government, which is shifting from provision of services to pushing organisations to do more advocacy work toward their government, demanding the services to be provided. However, the environment does not yet always support this advocacy work, considering the fact that LGBTIQ are still stigmatised and discriminated, and even criminalised in at least 70 countries.

Some participants also raised challenges that are faced by LGBTIQ community, especially in the crisis situation where internet connection is disrupted and people in general do not prioritize mental health issue. Another challenge is in shifting online the more creative approaches, like the use of visual art and performance, as it doesn't always go well.

WHAT ARE THE OPPORTUNITIES?

The internet era gives us more opportunity to work across nations and regions. This can be helpful for LGBTIQ people who live in restrictive countries to access services from another country, especially if the services are available in different languages. Participants proposed that having a directory of these services could be helpful. More organisations providing the services should be seen as an opportunity for collaboration. By doing this, not only duplication of services can be avoided, but it will also provide a more integrated service and support for the community.

SUMMARY

In summary, speakers recognised increased awareness, funding and research opportunities related to LGBTIQ and mental health concerns, while stressing that more and funding should be allocated to the dissemination of results of intervention and research projects, and to evaluations of existing services. This would allow us to identify the gaps that need to be filled. We also need to mobilise more and different kinds of factors of change including parents of LGBTIQ children and teachers and we should continue to educate health professionals, including mental health, about sexual orientation, gender diversity and gender expression topics.



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