

LGBT health improves when friends are just like them

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Individuals in the LGBT community face stressors that have dire consequences on their health. Researchers from Michigan State University are the first to pinpoint social factors that can reduce these stressors and improve health for LGBT people.

"When we reviewed past studies, we found a pretty stark bias toward studying what made things worse," said William Chopik, assistant professor of psychology at MSU and lead author. "That's really important research, but there are plenty of positive parts of people's lives that might disrupt some of the more stressful ones."

Chopik surveyed 2,560 LGBT adults and discovered that surrounding yourself with a large social network—particularly with people who share your [sexual identity](#)—reduced the harmful effects of discrimination on health. Specifically, participants measured their perceived discrimination, stress and social network size, as well as their [physical health](#), depression and life satisfaction.

"Having more family and friends around gives us more people to depend on when we really need it. When it comes to discrimination, people want someone they can rely on who can provide a listening ear," Chopik said. "A lot of the time, this means giving [emotional support](#), so having a larger social network makes that possible."

The surprising finding, Chopik said, related to who specifically made up one's network. The number of straight individuals in a network didn't

make a difference in improving health; rather, having more LGBT friends and family around was the most beneficial for those in the LGBT community. Additionally, ages of people in a network did not matter, so long as they shared an identity.

Chopik believes that the research, published in the *Journal of Health and Aging*, underscores how important a person's background is for their health and well-being.

"People experience all sorts of stress every day and the ability to cope with it effectively can prevent a major health crisis," Chopik said. "For LGBT people, we found that social networks were a resource they could rely on for support."

Many people who face ongoing discrimination shut down their relationships or isolate themselves, Chopik said. But for LGBT people, the larger the social circle, the better.

Additionally, Chopik hopes that the findings reinforce for [medical professionals](#) the importance of considering their patients' [psychological stress](#).

"Oftentimes, many in the medical community are agnostic about the repeated stressors that LGBT people face every day," Chopik said. "We found that the stress that arises from discrimination predicts worse physical and mental health. Having a better understanding of the risk and protective factors present in their patients' environments can lead to a more holistic understanding of their [health](#) and well-being."

Provided by Michigan State University

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