

Disclosing a Sexual Identity Is a Persistent Stressor Throughout the Lives of Sexual Minority Youth That Has Important Implications for Their Mental Health

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INTRODUCTION

Youth who identify as lesbian, gay, or bisexual, known collectively as sexual minority youth, experience stress associated with their nonheterosexual identity, behavior, and/or attraction during adolescence. Adolescence and young adulthood are often the periods of life when young people first tell their friends and family that they identify as a sexual minority. In other words, they “come out.” When families and friends accept youths’ sexual orientation, coming out can be beneficial for the mental health of sexual minority youth.

But disclosing a sexual minority identity can also be stressful and risky. This is particularly true when sexual minority youth are rejected by their families or victimized by their peers. Indeed, the stress tied to telling others about their sexual minority identity helps explain higher levels of depression among these youth.

Sexual minority youth have higher levels of depression in both adolescence and young adulthood compared to heterosexual youth. Depression symptoms in the general population typically peak in adolescence and decline during the transition to adulthood. Preliminary evidence suggests that the depression symptoms of sexual minority youth decline over time similar to the declines seen in heterosexual youth. Similar to this preliminary evidence, the authors of this brief hypothesize that the depression symptoms for sexual minority youth will also decline between adolescence and early adulthood.

The risk for additional stress and potential for compromised mental health tied to disclosing one’s sexual identity are well documented.

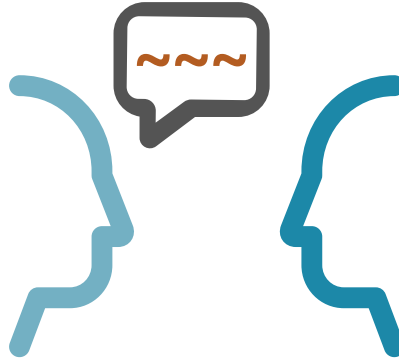
However, that evidence generally looks at disclosure stress at one time point in a sexual minority youth’s life when youth are asked to recount their first experiences coming out to others.

This brief reports on a recent study that extends previous research by focusing on how the stress from disclosure and depression change over the transition to adulthood. Recognizing that sexual minority youth come out to multiple people in different contexts throughout adolescence and young adulthood, the authors conduct one of the first longitudinal studies to explore disclosure stress and depression. To do so, they interviewed a large sample of sexual minority youth and young adults aged 15 to 24 every nine months over three years. The authors also examine whether changes in disclosure-related stress are correlated with changes in depression symptoms.

KEY FINDINGS

- ▶ Disclosure stress increased over time, despite youth reporting fewer disclosures at older ages.
- ▶ High levels of disclosure stress related to higher depression symptoms. But as predicted, the depression symptoms for sexual minority youth decreased as participants entered young adulthood.
- ▶ More disclosure stress at younger ages more strongly contributed to higher levels of depression symptoms than disclosure stress at older ages. As such, stressful disclosures may matter more for depression symptoms at younger ages. *See figure, next page.*

When coming out is **stressful**, the stress leads to higher levels of depression for **adolescents** than for **young adults**.



Note: Findings are from a longitudinal study of sexual minority youth and young adults aged 15 to 24 who were interviewed every nine months over three years about the stress associated with disclosing a sexual identity and their symptoms of depression.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Supporting sexual minority youth when they disclose their sexual identity in adolescence and young adulthood can have long-term benefits for their mental health. Sexual minority youth may be “out” to more people as they get older. Still, it is important to recognize that youth will continue to disclose a sexual identity, with new people and with new sexual identities, as they enter new contexts such as college, new jobs, new friendships, and new healthcare settings. These new disclosures, in turn, can be very stressful in unsupportive environments.

Individuals can support someone who discloses their sexual identity by accepting and embracing their identity, keeping their identity private, not making their disclosure about you or your organization, and recognizing that their sexual identity is one of many parts of who they are. Policymakers can support sexual minority youth by ensuring that all policies – for example, anti-bullying policies in schools – include the needs of sexual minority youth. These inclusive policies can then provide structural support for youth who may disclose a sexual identity.

REFERENCE

Mallory, A.B., Pollitt, A.M, Bishop, M.D. & Russell, S.T. (2021). Changes in disclosure stress and depression symptoms in a sample of lesbian, gay, and bisexual youth. *Developmental Psychology* 57(4):570-583.

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