

Psychological Factors Influencing Mental Health Inequities in LGBTQIA+ Individuals: The Role of Self-Esteem, Acceptance, and Rejection Sensitivity

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: The LGBTQIA+ community faces significant mental health challenges, influenced by the presence—or absence—of love, validation, and belonging, especially within families. **Methodology:** This literature review was conducted using databases such as Google Scholar, PubMed, SpringerLink, and Taylor & Francis Online, exploring—self-esteem, self-acceptance, perceived acceptance, and rejection sensitivity in mental health disparities. **Results:** Societal hostility and neglect deeply affect mental health, with transgender individuals facing the greatest challenges. Self-affirmation and perceived acceptance are key protective factors. **Conclusion:** Change begins with understanding, not just intellectually but humanely. We must create spaces where acceptance and compassion are lived experiences, not ideals.

Keywords: *LGBTQIA+ mental health, self-esteem, self-acceptance, perceived acceptance, rejection sensitivity*

The mental health and well-being of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, and asexual (LGBTQIA+) individuals have become a significant area of research, given their unique stressors and challenges. These challenges stem predominantly from societal prejudices, discrimination, and historical stigmatization, leading to mental health disparities when compared to their heterosexual and cisgender peers.

The historical classification of homosexuality as a mental disorder during the mid-20th century played a pivotal role in shaping societal attitudes toward LGBTQIA+ identities. Though the American Psychiatric Association (APA) officially removed homosexuality from the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) in 1973, the lingering effects of these historical classifications have persisted. They reinforced societal stigma, increased discrimination, and solidified negative perceptions, all of which continue to contribute to mental health inequities among LGBTQIA+ individuals (Drescher, 2015; Meyer, 2003, Winterhalter, 2021).

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These factors place LGBTQIA+ individuals at a higher risk of mental health challenges such as anxiety, depression, and suicidal ideation. Moreover, societal bias intersects with individual experiences, such as rejection from family members or lack of acceptance in their immediate social environments, further exacerbating these risks.

This paper aims to explore the factors contributing to these disparities by focusing on self-esteem, self-acceptance, perceived acceptance, and rejection sensitivity, as key psychological variables that intersect with societal discrimination and stigma. These variables have shown strong correlations with the mental health outcomes of LGBTQIA+ individuals, offering insight into the mechanisms driving disparities. Through examining these concepts, the paper seeks to provide an understanding of the complex interplay of stressors and protective factors impacting the mental well-being of LGBTQIA+ individuals.

Conceptual Framework

The existing body of research regarding LGBTQIA+ mental health offers crucial insights into the unique challenges faced by this community. This research, spanning various fields like psychology, sociology, and public health, explores diverse aspects of LGBTQIA+ mental health, such as mood dysregulation, perturbation, substance use, and suicidal tendencies.

The mental health disparities faced by LGBTQIA+ individuals are multifaceted and deeply rooted in societal, psychological, and environmental factors. A comprehensive understanding of these disparities requires analyzing the unique experiences of LGBTQIA+ individuals, as well as exploring historical contexts, stigma, discrimination, stressors, healthcare barriers, and coping mechanisms. A growing body of research provides evidence that LGBTQIA+ individuals experience significantly higher rates of mental health challenges compared to their heterosexual and cisgender peers.

Exploring the Landscape of LGBTQIA+ Mental Health

LGBTQIA+ individuals often navigate a world shaped by biases and societal rejection, and these challenges can take a heavy toll on their mental well-being. Inequities and discrimination are constant stressors that are deeply rooted in history, and they become especially pronounced during key moments like coming out, facing violence, or being rejected by family and friends. These painful experiences increase the likelihood of mental health struggles, including distress and even thoughts of suicide. Research shows that these difficulties often arise during adolescence or early adulthood, a time when individuals are figuring out who they are while also grappling with societal expectations. The weight of financial hardship, social isolation, and the absence of support from family or community only deepen the emotional strain, making it harder to cope with an already challenging journey.

The coming-out process is a pivotal event in the lives of LGBTQIA+ individuals and plays a significant role in mental health outcomes. While coming out can be liberating and lead to a sense of authenticity and self-affirmation, it can also evoke fear, apprehension, and rejection, depending on societal responses or the expectations of acceptance. Rosario et al. (2006) show that coming out can lead to anxiety, fear, and emotional stress, especially when individuals fear rejection or encounter negative reactions from their social circles. Similarly, Ryan et al. (2010) emphasize the role of familial acceptance during the coming-out process, highlighting that parental support fosters emotional stability, resilience, and mental well-

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being. Conversely, rejection by family members can lead to feelings of abandonment and unease. This duality illustrates how the coming-out process is both a source of relief and risk, with its mental health impact deeply influenced by societal and familial responses.

Studies like Marshal et al. (2011) and Grant et al. (2011) show that depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation are common among LGBTQIA+ youth, particularly during the coming-out period or when exposed to rejection, societal pressures, or bullying. Hatzenbuehler (2009) highlights that rejection triggers stress responses that can lead to biological changes exacerbating mental health risks. These findings indicate that coming out, while empowering for some, increases exposure to stressors that impact mental health negatively when met with rejection or societal bias.

Barriers to Mental Health Care for LGBTQIA+ Individuals

Despite these challenges, many LGBTQIA+ individuals are hesitant to seek professional mental health care due to systemic and societal barriers. Stigmatization within healthcare systems remains a major reason for this hesitation. King et al. (2008) identify that fear of being judged, mistreated, or stereotyped by mental health providers leads many individuals to avoid professional care. The lack of mental health professionals trained in LGBTQIA+ issues or equipped to offer gender-affirming care further limits access to necessary mental health services. Financial barriers compound these issues, particularly for marginalized groups within the LGBTQIA+ community, such as racial minorities and transgender individuals (Horak, 2019; Su et al., 2016).

The Role of Social Media in Mental Health Support for LGBTQIA+ Individuals

Social media has emerged as a vital alternative to traditional mental health services, offering opportunities for support and connection. Social media allows LGBTQIA+ individuals to connect with affirming communities, share experiences, and build relationships, particularly for those living in isolated or unsupportive environments. Ryan et al. (2010) emphasize how social media platforms foster a sense of belonging by creating online spaces where shared experiences and coping strategies can provide relief. However, social media also has its risks. Keles et al. (2020) and Feinstein et al. (2014) point out that cyberbullying, rejection and comparison to idealized representations on social media can amplify rejection sensitivity and worsen mental health challenges. This dual effect illustrates that while social media offers pathways to connection and support, it can also reinforce feelings of inadequacy, anxiety, and exclusion.

The coming-out process itself interacts with social media's double-edged nature. While social media offers opportunities for LGBTQIA+ individuals to find affirming communities and share their experiences, it can also expose them to rejection and stigmatization. Many individuals use social media as a way to cope with the fear of rejection by connecting with others who share similar experiences. However, these platforms can create harmful comparisons, particularly as individuals see idealized lifestyles and experiences that can lead to anxiety or self-doubt. Thus, social media becomes both a resource and a stressor during the coming-out journey and mental health journey more broadly.

These findings suggest that while systemic mental health barriers persist, social media has the potential to act as both a lifeline and a challenge. LGBTQIA+ individuals use it as an alternative way to cope with stigma, rejection, and barriers to care, but its adverse effects

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must also be acknowledged. Understanding these dual roles can help shape mental health interventions and provide better avenues for support.

The logical flow starts with the problems and challenges, moves to mental health disparities (the why and when of these risks), explains barriers to accessing mental health care, and then transitions into the role of social media as both a tool and a stressor.

Rejection Sensitivity as the Emotional Trigger

A psychological concept of heightened significance within the LGBTQIA+ community serves as a poignant reminder of the potential for rejection or criticism that individuals in this community may face based on their sexual orientation or gender identity. It's a state of hyper-alertness, an emotional reactivity to the looming possibility of rejection. The research underscores how rejection sensitivity significantly influences the mental health and well-being of LGBTQIA+ individuals (Downey & Feldman, 1996; Mohr & Kendra, 2011).

Within the LGBTQIA+ realm, the bitter experiences of exclusion, etched by societal biases, are an unfortunate reality. These negative encounters often serve as the crucible where rejection sensitivity takes root. It's a heightened awareness of the impending threat of rejection or criticism. The fear of discrimination amplifies emotional reactions and anxieties, rendering LGBTQIA+ individuals more finely attuned to the subtle cues that may presage imminent rejection (Feinstein et al., 2014; Meyer, 2003).

Feinstein et al.'s (2014) research cast a revealing light on the profound impact of rejection sensitivity within the LGBTQIA+ community. Their work unveils how the discrimination and prejudice faced by LGBTQIA+ individuals frequently cultivate an increased sensitivity to social rejection. This intensified sensitivity, borne from their lived experiences, often ushers in anxiety, depression, and a diminished sense of self-worth, thereby casting a shadow on their overall psychological well-being. This aligns with findings by Pachankis et al. (2015), who show that experiences of societal stigma contribute significantly to mental health challenges such as anxiety and depressive disorders.

Mohr and Kendra's (2011) study on rejection sensitivity in LGBTQIA+ individuals sheds light on the deep emotional challenges that fear of rejection can bring to their relationships. Their research shows that the fear of being rejected because of one's sexual orientation or gender identity can make it difficult to find satisfaction in relationships. This fear, fueled by the stigma and rejection many LGBTQIA+ people face in society, often becomes a barrier to forming and maintaining healthy connections. The constant worry about being judged or excluded can trigger social anxiety, making it hard to trust others and damaging self-esteem. Further supporting this, Soto et al. (2018) found that the fear of rejection often leads to avoidance in relationships, which only further erodes intimacy and connection, leaving LGBTQIA+ individuals feeling isolated and emotionally distant.

The concept of minority stress, as eloquently articulated by Meyer (2003), introduces the idea that LGBTQIA+ individuals bear an additional burden of stress due to their minority status. These stressors, often born of societal prejudice, discrimination, and the lingering spectre of stigma, become unwelcome companions in their lives. Over time, they condition individuals to expect biases and rejection, ultimately resulting in heightened rejection sensitivity. This chronic state of alertness perpetuates emotional reactivity, thereby affecting mental health and overall well-being (Frost & Meyer, 2011; Meyer, 2003).

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Frost and Meyer (2011) emphasize that minority stress serves as a chronic strain that impacts both emotional and psychological functioning. Research also suggests that the anticipation of rejection and societal marginalization acts as a learned response, heightening sensitivity to both real and perceived rejection (Cheng et al., 2014; Pachankis et al., 2015). Furthermore, it. The impact is not just an individual experience but is institutionalized, with systemic bias contributing to chronic stressors that shape heightened rejection sensitivity (Gonzalez & Pedersen, 2018).

Research highlights the emotional toll that experiences of discrimination can take on LGBTQIA+ individuals, creating a heightened sensitivity to social rejection that leaves lasting effects on both their mental health and relationship satisfaction. The concept of minority stress ties together the societal pressures, fear of rejection, and the mental strain many LGBTQIA+ people face, painting a complex picture of the challenges they endure. This calls for more empathy, understanding, and steadfast support in helping them navigate these difficulties. Emerging research supports this idea, showing that interventions focused on increasing social support, fostering acceptance, and building coping skills can help reduce the impact of rejection sensitivity and strengthen resilience in LGBTQIA+ individuals (Balsam & Mohr, 2007; Pachankis et al., 2015; van Gelder et al., 2018).

Self-Esteem as the Foundation for Identity Evaluation

Self-esteem is a psychological construct that represents an individual's overall evaluation of their self-worth and belief in their right to happiness, success, and love. It plays a crucial role in mental well-being, influencing how individuals cope with challenges, maintain social relationships, and build resilience during periods of adversity. Healthy self-esteem is associated with optimism, motivation, and better mental health outcomes, while low self-esteem is linked to depression, anxiety, and social withdrawal (Baumeister et al., 2003).

For LGBTQIA+ individuals, societal discrimination, stigma, and marginalization are frequent contributors to reduced self-esteem. Historical categorizations of homosexuality and gender identity as mental disorders during the mid-20th century reinforced societal biases, which created internalized shame and fear. These societal attitudes and historical stigmas continue to impact self-worth, as LGBTQIA+ individuals often face pressure to conform to heteronormative expectations, further leading to diminished self-esteem (Cohen-Kettenis et al., 2003).

Research by Hatzenbuehler (2009) highlights how discrimination and social stigma lead to chronic stress responses that impact mental health and lower self-esteem. *Minority stress theory*, as described by Meyer (2003), identifies discrimination, rejection, and societal exclusion as persistent stressors that erode the self-worth of LGBTQIA+ individuals. Additionally, fear of discrimination can lead to social isolation and avoidance, further impairing self-esteem.

Familial relationships play a crucial role in shaping the self-esteem of LGBTQIA+ individuals. When they come out to family members, the response they receive can have a profound impact on their mental health. Acceptance from loved ones often leads to improved well-being and a stronger sense of self-worth. On the other hand, rejection can trigger emotional distress, anxiety, and feelings of shame. Studies by Willoughby et al. (2008) and Puckett et al. (2015) highlight that when family members offer their support and

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acceptance, it creates a nurturing environment that boosts self-esteem and emotional health, helping individuals feel more secure in themselves and their identities.

Intersectionality adds another layer of complexity to self-esteem. The concept, as explored by Hart et al. (2011), highlights how overlapping marginalized identities, such as race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status, intersect with LGBTQIA+ identity, magnifying experiences of discrimination and exclusion. These compounded stressors affect mental health, particularly by reducing feelings of self-worth.

Violence and discrimination are additional stressors that negatively impact the self-esteem of LGBTQIA+ individuals. Transgender individuals are at particularly high risk for violence and harassment, which significantly lowers their mental health and self-esteem. Research by Testa et al. (2015) identifies exposure to violence as a critical stressor that leads to diminished trust, fear, and social withdrawal, further impairing self-esteem.

Comparative studies examining these factors can provide insights into how cultural attitudes, legal protections, and societal norms influence mental health and self-worth. For example, individuals in societies with more inclusive laws or progressive attitudes report higher levels of self-esteem compared to those in regions with harsher stigmas or criminalization (Hatzenbuehler, 2009).

In conclusion, self-esteem is a vital component of mental well-being, and for LGBTQIA+ individuals, it is shaped by societal discrimination, violence, familial acceptance, intersectionality, and exposure to rejection. Addressing mental health disparities among LGBTQIA+ individuals requires multifaceted interventions, including family acceptance programs, peer support networks, resilience-building strategies, and culturally affirming mental health care. Continued research into these areas will provide further insights into the factors influencing self-esteem and the interventions needed to foster mental well-being among LGBTQIA+ individuals.

Perceived Acceptance as a Social Buffer

For LGBTQIA+ people, perceived acceptance is a fundamental idea that greatly influences their general quality of life and mental health. It describes how people assess their degree of acceptability from their immediate surroundings, larger social standards, and cultural backgrounds. Emotional stability, resilience, self-esteem, and identity formation are all strongly correlated with perceived acceptance. In social, cultural, and personal contexts, it symbolizes not just outward acceptance but also how people feel appreciated, respected, and supported for their gender identity or sexual orientation (Herek, 2009; Pachankis et al., 2015).

Perceived acceptance is a multidimensional construct influenced by numerous psychological and social factors, such as relationships with family members, peers, social institutions, and societal attitudes toward LGBTQIA+ identities. Social interactions and the presence or absence of inclusive affirmations significantly shape these perceptions, thereby affecting mental health outcomes. LGBTQIA+ individuals with supportive family members, affirming friends, and inclusive communities tend to report higher levels of perceived acceptance (Mohr & Fassinger, 2000; Pachankis et al., 2015; Ryan et al., 2010).

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According to Mohr and Fassinger (2000), perceived social acceptance is important since it is linked to improved self-esteem and general well-being among LGBTQIA+ people. According to their research, coping strategies in the face of stress and discrimination are facilitated by acceptance, which also fosters resilience. In a similar vein, Balsam and Mohr (2007) showed that people who felt more accepted by society had lower rates of anxiety and depression than people who felt rejected and stigmatized. On the other hand, negative impacts on mental health, including increased risks for anxiety, depression, and other mental health issues, can result from experiences of social rejection, disconnection, or invalidation (D'Augelli et al., 2002; Meyer, 2003).

Perceived acceptance also serves as a buffer against the negative effects of minority stress, a theoretical framework used to describe the unique stressors experienced by marginalized populations. Minority stress includes experiences of discrimination, rejection, and societal stigmatization, which can have deleterious effects on psychological well-being. Perceived acceptance helps mitigate these effects by fostering a sense of belonging, emotional safety, and validation (Frost et al., 2006; Meyer, 2003; Pachankis et al., 2015). Social support networks and affirmations from trusted individuals have proven instrumental in reducing the harmful effects of minority stress and promoting mental health in LGBTQIA+ individuals (Frost & Meyer, 2011; Pachankis et al., 2015; Tullis et al., 2012).

Research by Pachankis et al. (2015) underscores the importance of perceived acceptance in shaping coping mechanisms. When these strategies are supported by feelings of validation and support, they help LGBTQIA+ individuals better navigate discrimination and societal challenges, thereby improving emotional well-being and stability. Positive mental health outcomes, such as increased resilience and life satisfaction, are also linked to situations that promote acceptance, according to Frost and Meyer (2011). This illustrates how important it is for LGBTQIA+ people to be accepted by society to improve their mental health and psychological adaptability. Additionally, perceived acceptance improves emotional regulation and resilience when combined with social attitudes and environmental factors, according to van Gelder et al. (2018).

The formative years of LGBTQIA+ youth are profoundly shaped by the impact of perceived acceptance. Their journey is imprinted with experiences of acceptance or rejection, within both their homes and communities, exerting a profound influence on their psychological well-being (Ryan et al., 2010). In the hearts of those youth who sense acceptance from their families and peers, positive mental health blossoms, accompanied by a heightened sense of self-worth. Conversely, the lingering shadows of rejection and discrimination give rise to enduring mental health challenges, including depression and anxiety. This emphasizes the crucial significance of cultivating supportive and accepting environments for LGBTQIA+ youth.

Perceived acceptance extends its embrace far beyond individual relationships, venturing into the realms of society and culture. The insightful work by Herek (2009) highlights the profound impact when LGBTQIA+ individuals perceive society as accepting. In this light, they experience fewer mental health disparities (Herek, 2009). On the contrary, the haunting spectre of perceived discrimination or rejection on a grand scale casts a long shadow, leading to mental health struggles, dwindling self-esteem, and diminished well-being. The societal and cultural aspects of perceived acceptance serve as the backdrop upon which the mental health and self-esteem of LGBTQIA+ individuals are painted.

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Self-Acceptance as an Internal Journey to Resilience

Self-acceptance, a process involving recognizing, embracing, and finding peace with one's true self—including one's sexual orientation or gender identity—is vital for the mental and emotional well-being of LGBTQIA+ individuals. It involves coming to terms with one's identity and understanding that being LGBTQIA+ is a natural and valid aspect of an individual's existence. This journey toward self-acceptance has profound implications for mental health, self-esteem, and overall quality of life (Neff, 2003; Ryan et al., 2010).

Societal stigma significantly hinders self-acceptance among LGBTQIA+ individuals. Historical discrimination, prejudice, and stigmatization have led to the internalization of negative beliefs, manifesting as feelings of shame, inadequacy, and low self-worth (Meyer, 2003; Balsam et al., 2005). The perception that LGBTQIA+ identities are less valid or acceptable in many societies directly impacts the journey toward self-acceptance. Confronting and overcoming these internalized stigmas is an essential step for LGBTQIA+ individuals to achieve mental and emotional well-being (Balsam et al., 2005; Meyer, 2003). The process of *coming out* represents an important milestone in the journey toward self-acceptance for many LGBTQIA+ individuals. It involves disclosing one's LGBTQIA+ identity to others, which can elicit a wide range of reactions, from acceptance and support to rejection and discrimination. The intricate nature of the coming-out process and its impact on self-acceptance are highlighted by research conducted by Rosario et al. (2006). For some people, coming out can be freeing and lead to a stronger sense of honesty and self-worth, but it can also cause dread, tension, and anxiety, particularly if others reject you or react negatively. These diverse experiences highlight the complex interrelationships of mental health, self-acceptance, and societal acceptance (D'Augelli et al., 2002; Rosario et al., 2006). Research suggests that social support can mitigate the challenges associated with stigma and aid in the development of self-acceptance. LGBTQIA+ individuals who have access to affirming social support networks tend to exhibit higher levels of mental health and well-being compared to those with limited or no support (Coleman, 1982; D'Augelli, 2002). These findings emphasize the importance of supportive and affirming environments in facilitating self-acceptance and mental well-being among LGBTQIA+ individuals.

The intersectionality of multiple identities, encompassing factors such as race, ethnicity, and gender identity, further influences self-acceptance. Studies by scholars like Bowleg (2008) delve into the complexities of these intersections, emphasizing that the unique combinations of identities affect self-acceptance experiences.

DISCUSSION

In summary, this paper has delved into the intricate terrain of LGBTQIA+ mental health, with a focus on key factors including self-esteem, self-acceptance, perceived acceptance, and rejection sensitivity. The mental well-being of LGBTQIA+ individuals is profoundly shaped by various stressors, discrimination, familial dynamics, and the complexities of multiple minority identities. The delicate interplay of these elements is further compounded by the experience of coming out, the level of acceptance within families, and the broader societal and cultural perceptions of acceptance. The concept of heightened rejection sensitivity, particularly in the face of discrimination, plays a pivotal role in influencing the mental health and satisfaction of LGBTQIA+ individuals.

The urgency of addressing disparities in LGBTQIA+ mental health cannot be emphasized enough. Despite advances in understanding and supporting this community, disparities

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persist. LGBTQIA+ individuals continue to grapple with elevated risks of mental health issues, including depression, anxiety, and substance use disorders. Discrimination and societal biases further worsen these disparities, perpetuating a hostile social environment. The historical classification of homosexuality as a mental disorder casts a long shadow, underscoring the importance of ongoing efforts to challenge stigma.

To rectify these disparities, further research is imperative. It is essential to comprehend the nuanced experiences of LGBTQIA+ individuals across their diverse identities and backgrounds. Research should also focus on the effectiveness of interventions and support systems tailored to their unique needs. These interventions should include strategies for bolstering self-esteem, self-acceptance, and perceived acceptance while addressing the heightened rejection sensitivity often encountered by this community. Additionally, raising awareness and fostering acceptance at societal and cultural levels can contribute to a more inclusive and supportive environment for LGBTQIA+ individuals. Together, we can imagine a world where no one feels like an outsider in their own story—a world rooted in dignity, resilience, and belonging.

In a world that aspires to equity and inclusion, prioritizing the mental health and emotional well-being of all individuals, irrespective of their sexual orientation or gender identity, is of paramount importance. The disparities faced by the LGBTQIA+ community serve as a stark reminder of the work that still lies ahead. Through research, understanding, and targeted interventions, we can build a future in which LGBTQIA+ individuals enjoy mental and emotional well-being on par with the broader population.

Limitations

While this paper offers valuable insights into the mental health challenges faced by LGBTQIA+ individuals, it's important to recognize its limitations. This research is built on a review of existing studies, and, like any literature review, it reflects the current body of limited work available in the academic community. Some studies may be inaccessible or not fully represent the diverse experiences within the LGBTQIA+ population. Additionally, there is a lack of studies conducted in diverse cultural or societal contexts, particularly those that explore the experiences of LGBTQIA+ individuals outside of Western countries. The paper also touches on the intersection of various identities—like race, class, and disability—but this is an area that could be explored in more depth. Future research should aim to fill these gaps and offer a more comprehensive view of the LGBTQIA+ community's mental health challenges across different backgrounds.

Clinical Significance

The findings of this research carry significant implications for clinical practice. For clinicians working with LGBTQIA+ individuals, creating a space that feels safe and affirming is critical. People in this community often carry heavy emotional burdens due to experiences of discrimination and rejection, so mental health professionals must approach therapy with empathy and understanding. Building self-esteem and self-acceptance is a vital part of healing, and clinicians can help by offering validation and fostering environments where LGBTQIA+ clients feel truly seen and heard. It's also important to address the impact of family dynamics and societal stigma in therapy, as these external factors often play a major role in mental health struggles. Mental health professionals must be advocates for their clients, not only in the therapy room but also by pushing for societal changes that

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promote greater acceptance and inclusion. By doing so, we can create a world where LGBTQIA+ individuals can thrive emotionally and mentally, just like anyone else.

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Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

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Ethics statement

Considering the nature of this review, which synthesizes data from previously published studies, ethical approval was not deemed necessary.

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