

Audio Transcript

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Guest:	Eve Rosenfeld, PhD
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Dr. Colleen Becket-Davenport:

Welcome to the PTSD Bytes podcast, brought to you by the Department of Veterans Affairs National Center for PTSD. In this series, we talk to experts about post-traumatic stress disorder and mental health with a focus on free digital resources that can help. This is your host, Dr. Colleen Beckett Davenport. In this episode, we'll be talking about trauma in the LGBTQ+ community. I'm joined today by Dr. Eve Rosenfeld, who is a postdoctoral fellow in mental illness research and treatment, and the Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Coordinator at the National Center for PTSD, Dissemination and Training Division. She's also a postdoctoral fellow at the Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Services at Stanford University. Welcome, Dr. Rosenfeld.

Dr. Eve Rosenfeld:

Hi. Thank you for having me.

Dr. Colleen Becket-Davenport:

So, let's start by explaining what we're talking about today. What does LGBTQ+ mean and why are we talking about this community and trauma?

Dr. Eve Rosenfeld:

LGBTQ+ stands for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer, the plus represents a wide variety of other sexual orientation and gender minority identities such as asexual, non-binary, and so on. The LGBTQ+ community is made up of people from all walks of life and diverse identities who face some additional challenges because of their sexual orientation or gender identity. And that's one of the reasons we're talking about this community today, to shine a spotlight on their experiences, including the traumatic experiences and what treatment options are available to help offload some of that burden. I'd also love to use this time to celebrate the resilience and strong sense of community that LGBTQ+ folks have built for themselves.

Dr. Colleen Becket-Davenport:

I love that because we often focus on the difficulties this community may face rather than highlighting their resilience and their contributions to the wider culture and community. So, let's come back to that in a moment. Since this is a podcast about trauma, it's also important that we acknowledge that LGBTQ+ people are at a higher risk for trauma and PTSD. So, can you tell me why that is?

Dr. Eve Rosenfeld:

LGBTQ+ folks are more likely to experience interpersonal traumas. This refers to traumatic events that involve a perpetrator and a victim, like child abuse, domestic violence, physical or sexual assault. Interpersonal traumas are especially likely to lead to PTSD compared to some other types of traumatic events like accidents or natural disasters.

Dr. Colleen Becket-Davenport:

Wow. So, LGBTQ+ folks are more likely to experience trauma, and I imagine this isn't a secret in the LGBTQ+ community, so there must be the additional stress of that.

Dr. Eve Rosenfeld:

Yeah, there's a term called minority stress, the added stressors that members of a group face because of their identity. Minority stress experiences also make PTSD symptoms worse, and there's some emerging evidence from research that minority stress in and of itself can lead to PTSD symptoms even when the person hasn't experienced or witnessed violence directly.

Dr. Colleen Becket-Davenport:

Absolutely. You know, we spoke with Dr. Brittany Hall Clark about racial stress and trauma, and the mental toll of chronic race-based discrimination on people of color. And it sounds like this also applies to LGBTQ+ people. Can you say more about some of the ways that LGBTQ+ people experience discrimination or prejudice?

Dr. Eve Rosenfeld:

There are a lot of examples, and this can be different based on specific identities that people hold. It can be overt or obvious discrimination like being fired from a job for being transgender, which is still legal in many states. There are also more covert or sneaky forms of discrimination. These are what we call microaggressions. For example, when people say things like, I don't care who you love, just don't make it your whole personality. For some members of the LGBTQ+ community discrimination can even be perpetrated by other members of the LGBTQ+ community. This is really common for bisexual folks, for example, who experience biphobia often from outside the community for not being quote unquote straight enough, but also from within the LGBTQ community for not being quote unquote gay enough. And then there are also structural or built-in forms of discrimination, like discriminatory anti-LBTQ laws, which we're seeing a lot of right now.

Dr. Colleen Becket-Davenport:

And of course, the stress of discrimination piles up over time. So how would you say this impacts the LGBTQ+ community?

Dr. Eve Rosenfeld:

Experiencing discrimination eventually leads LGBTQ folks to expect discrimination, which is another part of minority stress. You're always expecting that you're going to run into discrimination, which triggers that biological danger warning system to be looking out for those signals that you're not safe that could lead someone to hide or conceal their identity. And that's another part of minority stress managing decisions about when to be out, when to hide your identity. Another way, LGBTQ people are affected is they can internalize the stigma about being LGBTQ, which means that they start to believe some of those negative things that people say about them. They might start to think maybe I should be ashamed of who I love or how I express my gender.

Dr. Colleen Becket-Davenport:

And what does research say about how minority stress impacts their mental health over time?

Dr. Eve Rosenfeld:

LGBTQ folks are not only more likely to have PTSD, they're also at greater risk for substance use disorders, depression, anxiety disorders, and suicide.

Dr. Colleen Becket-Davenport:

Which is obviously very concerning. And at the same time, you mentioned earlier that being a member of the LGBTQ+ community can be a source of strength or resilience. So, can you say more about that?

Dr. Eve Rosenfeld:

Absolutely. The LGBTQ+ community is extremely resilient. There's a huge sense of pride and a massive social support network that can be accessed for LGBTQ folks through community networks and spaces that LGBTQ people have built. One of the ways is through something called found families. These are friendship groups that often form extremely close relationships and involve levels of commitment, support, and loyalty. Beyond found families, LGBTQ folks benefit from both seeking and providing social support from and to other LGBTQ folks.

Dr. Colleen Becket-Davenport:

Do LGBTQ+ folks seek mental health care at the same rates as their peers who aren't LGBTQ+?

Dr. Eve Rosenfeld:

LGBTQ folks actually seek mental health care at higher rates, and that makes sense given that they experience more mental health challenges. There also tends to be less mental health stigma in the LGBTQ+ community. There is a downside though, even though LGBTQ+ folks are accessing treatment, they still report large unmet mental health needs, which I think means that the services we're providing aren't meeting their unique needs and lived experiences. They also experience discrimination in mental health care that can impact their treatment. For example, sometimes mental health providers mislabel, bisexual or gender fluid identities as forms of quote unquote identity disturbance, which can impact how they're diagnosed.

Dr. Colleen Becket-Davenport:

So, for those who do decide to seek treatment, what should they look for? Are there any treatments that are designed for people in the LGBTQ+ community?

Dr. Eve Rosenfeld:

In a perfect world, I would say to find a provider who shares important aspects of your identity with you. The shared lived experiences mean that you won't have to spend a lot of time explaining things to your provider. However, it can be really difficult to find a provider who matches your identities, who's taking new patients, takes your insurance and treats this specific problem you're looking to find treatment for. But I would definitely say to look for someone who's an expert in treating the types of mental health problems you're experiencing. So, a PTSD expert if you're looking to work on PTSD. And there are other little signals that a provider is an LGBTQ+ affirming provider.

Dr. Colleen Becket-Davenport:

And what is an LGBTQ+ affirming provider?

Dr. Eve Rosenfeld:

That's a great question. An LGBTQ+ affirming provider actively learns about LGBTQ+ culture and how to consider the needs of LGBTQ+ folks when providing care. Some little green flags to look out for are things like having pronouns in their bios or listing LGBTQ+ affirming therapy in their areas of expertise. It is completely within your rights as the consumer to ask the potential providers some questions before starting treatment, like for how many years have you been working with LGBTQ+ patients? And what is your approach to working with LGBTQ+ clients? It's important for you, the potential client to feel empowered and set some standards for the minimum credentials you're looking for. I'd also recommend looking for clinics that specialize in LGBTQ care. You can use the Trevor Project to find connections to additional resources and your local pride center where they have folks who can connect you with LGBTQ affirming providers and additional mental health resources.

Dr. Colleen Becket-Davenport:

And how about veterans? How can LGBTQ+ Veterans who receive care at the VA find treatment?

Dr. Eve Rosenfeld:

You can find information at the VA LGBTQ+ Health Office website, and now every VA facility has an LGBTQ+ Veteran Care Coordinator, so they can help you get connected with the right providers. And again, recognizing that you're the consumer here and have the right to ask for what you want can really help. Some VA sites even have mental health clinics that specialize in LGBTQ+ affirming care.

Dr. Colleen Becket-Davenport:

And for our listeners who may work in mental health settings, what can they do to communicate that their clinic or facility is a safe space for LGBTQ+ folks?

Dr. Eve Rosenfeld:

Some of the things that I mentioned before, like including your pronouns in your bios, having pride flags to decorate your office and so on can be helpful clues that you are an LGBTQ affirming provider, but it's really important that you follow through on these things. What's often more helpful than just communicating that your office is a safe space is to actually do the work to make it a safe space. Taking continuing education trainings focused on LGBTQ affirming care, reading research and therapist manuals on providing LGBTQ affirming care.

Dr. Colleen Becket-Davenport:

And what about digital resources? Do you have anything to recommend for LGBTQ+ people who've been through trauma?

Dr. Eve Rosenfeld:

In terms of digital resources, there aren't a ton of digital interventions or tools that we know work for LGBTQ+ folks, but there are a few that have some initial research support like Trans Life, which is a suicide prevention mobile app for transgender non-binary and gender expansive folks. And Q Chat Space, which is a digital LGBTQ+ center for teens with helpful resources. But other self-guided VA mobile apps for PTSD, like PTSD Coach and Beyond MST might be useful in helping to build coping skills.

Dr. Colleen Becket-Davenport:

Well, that's all we have time for today. Dr. Rosenfeld, thank you so much for joining us to talk about such an important topic.

Dr. Eve Rosenfeld:

Thank you for having me.

Dr. Colleen Becket-Davenport:

And as a reminder to our listeners, you can learn more about LGBTQ+ care at the VA at www.patientcare.va.gov/lgbt and providers can pursue training in LGBTQ+ plus affirming care offered through professional organizations and LGBTQ focus special interest groups.

Dr. Andrea Jamison:

Hello, this is Andrea Jamison and I'm the executive producer of the PTSD Bytes podcast. Catch new episodes by following or subscribing to PTSD Bytes on your preferred podcast app. Show notes and more information are on our website, www.ptsd.va.gov/podcast. Thank you for joining us.