People living with mental illnesses experience discrimination. In fact, some people may refuse to seek professional help to avoid the discrimination they may face.

Now, consider what it is like to face a mental illness as part of an additionally discriminated against group; in this case, as a lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer (LGBTQ+) person. LGBTQ+ people confront discrimination based on their sexual orientation and/or gender identity while also dealing with the societal bias against mental illnesses. Further, those who are living in poverty, have a disability, are BIPOC, or are part of other historically marginalized communities experience more forms of discrimination which add to and compound with one another.

The effects of experiencing discrimination for two or more identities at the same time can be particularly harmful, especially for someone who seeks treatment.

For example, some people report having to hide their sexual orientation and/or gender identity from those in the mental health system for fear of being ridiculed, rejected, or in extreme cases, subjected to physical violence. On the other hand, when LGBTQ+ people with serious mental illnesses seek assistance from LGBTQ+ organizations, these agencies are often not educated about mental illnesses and are ill-equipped to provide appropriate services.

If people cannot be open and feel supported in who they are in a treatment setting, this will negatively affect their ability to benefit from the therapeutic experience. This is especially true for those who are members of two or more historically marginalized communities.

It is important to remember, however, that discrimination is something that society creates. It is not the fault of the individual. To overcome discrimination, we need to recognize it and work to change it.

One important way to do this is to join a political or advocacy group like NAMI. Joining forces with others to combat unjust policies or unfair treatment can be a productive way to work to end discrimination.

Providers at the Rainbow Heights Club, a Brooklyn-based program that serves LGBTQ+ people, suggest the following ways to overcome discrimination:

- Think carefully about the labels applied to people, as labels can create further isolation and discrimination.
- Don’t assume someone’s sexual orientation or gender identity; also, don’t assume what their treatment needs are based on stereotypes of either LGBTQ+ people OR those living with mental illnesses.
- Empathize and validate the experiences of LGBTQ+ people.
- Recognize that discrimination exists for LGBTQ+ people and can affect access to many resources.
- Work in coordination with people with mental illness rather than assuming that providers have all the answers.

(For more information: www.rainbowheights.org)

While it is imperative for society at large to dismantle discrimination, many LGBTQ+ people with mental illnesses still experience discrimination in their daily lives. Here are some suggestions for taking care of yourself:
• Surround yourself with supportive people, such as family, friends or others who may be dealing with similar issues as you.
• Get appropriate treatment. Getting treatment may help you feel less isolated and to better understand your illness.
• When safe, share your experiences with others. By breaking the silence, either about being LGBTQ+, having a mental illness, or both, you can help people understand the discrimination experienced as a result of holding both identities.
• Join a political or advocacy group like NAMI. Joining forces with others to combat unjust policies or unfair treatment can also be a productive way to cope with discrimination.

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