

Mind Your Positive Health

Positive Health for Lesbian & Bisexual Women





funded by:



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Graphic Design and Illustrations: Naomi Fein | www.creativenaomi.com

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Positive Health for for Lesbian & Bisexual Women

Dear Reader

LINC is delighted to bring this booklet to you as part of our Target 1000 Positive Health Project. It is a valuable resource which we believe will enhance the lives of lesbian and bisexual (LB) women. Developed in collaboration with HSE South and the Gay & Lesbian Equality Network (GLEN), Target 1000 aims to build on previous mental health promotion work carried out by LINC. It consists of two separate but inter-related programmes. Firstly, a community education programme promoting coping skills and help-seeking behaviour among LB women. Secondly, a health care practitioner education programme promoting awareness and understanding of the mental health issues affecting LB women.

This booklet is produced under the community education programme.

As members of the lesbian and bisexual community we hope this booklet will be of benefit to you and will encourage you to look after your mental health. We would like to thank the funders, Dormant Accounts and the Department of Health and Children. We would also like to thank the Target 1000 working group for their valuable contribution, support and advice. Membership of this group includes: Odhran Allen (GLEN); Dr Julie Norris (Independent Consultant); Emma Hurley (Community member); Kate Moynihan (LINC Steering Group); Helen Slattery (LINC Steering Group) and Toddy Hogan (LINC Co-Ordinator).

LINC Steering Group
April 2012

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Top Tips for Positive Mental Health

1. Accept Yourself:

Being happy with who you are is key to positive mental health. Accepting who you are can be challenging for lesbian and bisexual women. It is hard to change the reactions of others but you can change how you feel about yourself. Feeling positive about who you are helps others to be positive toward you.



2. Connect:

Making the effort to connect with friends or get involved in activities that involve others will make a difference. Contact with others is always good but particularly important when you don't feel like talking to anyone. Attending or volunteering for organised activities in LINC or your local LGBT centre/group is a good way to make friends and keep connected.



3. Keep active, eat well & sleep well:

Looking after your physical health has considerable benefits for your mental health. Healthy food, exercise and good rest will affect how you feel, how you think and even how creative you are.



4. Avoid bingeing:

Drinking alcohol, taking drugs or eating to deal with problems will only make things worse. We have a community of great events, large and small, and a culture that can sometimes revolve around drink or drug use. Break up long events with a meal and try organising activities that don't involve drinking. Bingeing can lead to anxiety, depression and low self-esteem.

5. Relax and give yourself a break:

Make sure you regularly take time to do something you enjoy. Doing something you enjoy will make you feel better!



Golden Health Tip:

**Talk about it and ask for help:
Asking for help is a sign of strength not a sign of weakness.**

You don't have to manage everything on your own. Talk to someone you trust. You can talk confidentially to your GP, the staff in LINC, your local LGBT centre/group or call one of the Helplines listed on the back of this booklet.



Coming Out



Coming out is a lifelong process. For many it is very scary at the start and requires all of the courage that can be mustered, for others it is easy. For most it gets easier and easier the more people they are out to.

The LINC Health Survey identified that there is an average of an 8 year time span between recognising attraction to women and coming out. Eight years is a long time and is indicative of how difficult many women find coming out to be.

The Survey found that on average women found it most difficult to come out to parents, followed by neighbours, then children, colleagues, other family members with friends being the easiest people to come out to. But individual women's experiences may differ to this depending on their

own circumstances, the types of relationships they have with people and the attitudes of the people in their life.

The most significant fears associated with coming out are that a relationship with another will be lost or that work opportunities will be affected. Not only do we have to deal with the reactions of others, we also have to deal with our own internalised homophobia and how we think about ourselves.

	Average Age	Eldest Age
First attracted to a woman	17.68	42
First sex with woman	23.27	42
Came Out	25.72	51



It is important to remember that:

- * Coming out is a process with many stages, so give yourself time
- * Make sure you are ready
- * Choose a good time – a time when others can concentrate on what you are saying
- * Remember it took you a while to come to terms with your sexuality, it may take others time too
- * Get support from friends or the staff at LINC or your local LGBT centre/group
- * Coming out can be stressful, check out page 8 for healthy ways to de-stress
- * Learn about internalised homophobia (see page 5) – being lesbian or bisexual does not mean that you are a bad person or have let anyone down
- * Being lesbian or bisexual is a natural expression of sexual orientation. Approximately 10% of any population are lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgendered (LGBT).

You are entitled to live a happy, healthy life as a lesbian/bisexual woman



Dealing with Homophobia

Will I still be welcomed if they know I'm lesbian?



I'm so relieved!



We like you for who you are!

Homophobia is generally negative attitudes, hostility towards or fear of gay people. The lesser used term lesbophobia relates similarly to lesbian and bisexual women. Homophobia can manifest in different ways, for example homophobic jokes, physical attacks, discrimination in the workplace and media representation.

Issues such as previous laws, ignorance, difference and religious attitudes have all contributed to some elements of society having a negative attitude towards lesbians and some lesbians having a negative attitude

towards themselves (internalised homophobia). These negative attitudes can create difficult situations for lesbian and bisexual women to deal with, which in turn puts pressure on lesbian and bisexual women and can result in fear, anxiety and depression.

Tackling homophobia is an issue for government, community groups, sporting associations, employers, health services, the media, families – basically society in general. Dealing with homophobia is an issue for every lesbian and bisexual woman. Ways of managing homophobia depend on the situation.

For example:

- * In situations where you know the person and are likely to be seeing them again - you could calmly explain how the action/remark made you feel and ask them not to do it again. This tactic is effective for people who did not intend to offend you.
- * In work/school situations where homophobia does not stop after you have calmly asked, then you should seek the support of your manager/teacher.
- * In social situations where homophobia doesn't stop, consider distancing yourself from people who are offensive to you.
- * In situations where you do not know the person or are unlikely to meet them again, only challenge them if you feel safe and confident to do so. It is better to ignore something than place yourself in an unsafe situation.

- * If you feel threatened or at risk or have been the victim of homophobic crime talk to the Garda Diversity Liaison Officer.
- * Seek support from LINC or your local LGBT centre/group

The effects of homophobia on you can be reduced by:

1. **Accepting yourself:** Like yourself and be confident about who you are
2. **Support:** Build a support network around you of people who value you for who you are
3. **Awareness:** Be aware of your rights – your rights can empower you to manage situations



You have a right to live free from harassment. If you have any difficulty in standing up for your right then ask for help because you deserve to feel safe and secure

Coping with Stress and Anxiety

Stress is a physiological response to thoughts, actions or situations that are a threat to us. Stress may or may not be related to being lesbian/bisexual but it can't be totally avoided, so we need a strategy to manage stress and to find ways to de-stress.

Manage your stress

1. Write down what causes you stress at this moment
2. Look at the strategies on the right handside and choose the best action or actions that suit the cause.



Managing Stress – What skills should I develop?

Develop skills that will help you to manage stress. Check in with LINC or your local LGBT centre/group for workshops on:

- * Communication skills
- * Assertiveness
- * Skills to manage emotions, particularly fear and anger
- * Self-awareness and self-development skills

LINC's Health Survey found that lesbian and bisexual women had lower levels of stress than found in the average population - Let's keep it that way!

Avoid Unnecessary Stress

- * Learn how to say 'no' and mean it
- * Avoid taking on too much
- * Avoid people or places that you find stressful if possible
- * Avoid engaging in issues that will leave you feeling stressed

Sorry, but I can't



Be Willing to Compromise

- * Adapt to the Stress
- * Try to look at the issue positively
- * Keep the issue in perspective – how important is it really?
- * Set yourself realistic goals and standards
- * Change focus to other positive things in your life

Lets change this!



Change the Causes of Stress

- * Manage your time differently
- * Do things differently
- * Be assertive
- * Express how you are feeling

Nothing stays the same...

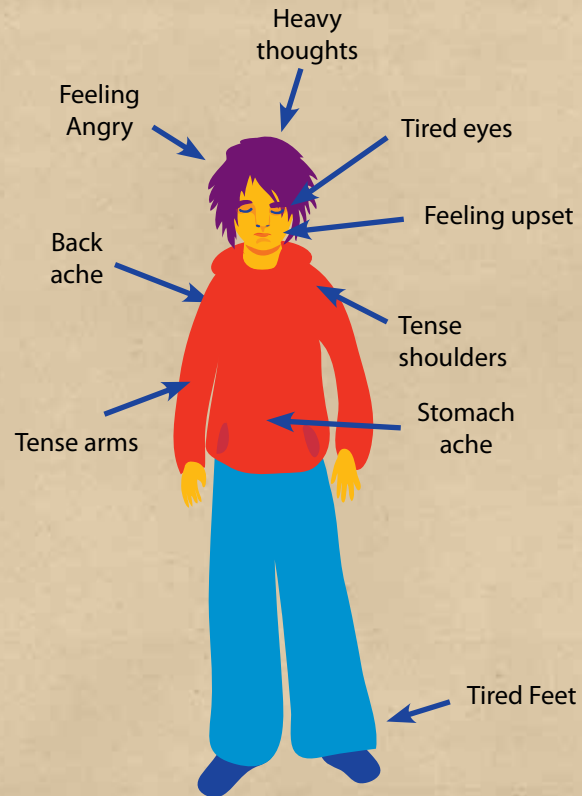


Accept the Causes of Stress

- * Learn to forgive (and forget) – people make mistakes
- * Give up control of the uncontrollable
- * Learn from your own mistakes, then forgive yourself
- * Don't bottle feelings, talk to someone and express them. Counterbalance with an enjoyable experience



De-Stressing



Stress creates 'fight or flight' responses in the body, including tightening of muscles, increased heart rate and lowering the effectiveness of the immune system. These temporary responses prepare our body to fight or run away and as soon as we stop fighting or running, we naturally de-stress. Given that we don't get the opportunity to fight or run away from many modern causes of stress it is important that we de-stress in other ways on a regular basis.

Because stress affects the body's immune system, high levels of stress contribute to increased vulnerability to illness and also affects capacity to recover from illness and injuries.

Good de-stressors are activities that cause the muscles to relax which in turn sends a message to the brain that the cause of stress has passed and the body can return to normal functioning.



Good de-stressing includes:



Unhealthy, ineffective de-stressing includes:

- Alcohol
- Smoking
- Hours in front of the TV
- Drugs (including extreme use of caffeine/coffee/tea)
- Procrastination
- Getting angry with others
- Avoidance of problems

Am I just having
a sad day or is it
depression?

Feeling Sad



Generally we feel sad because something has happened to cause us to feel sad, but sometimes we just feel sad and there is no apparent reason. Dealing with homophobia, rejection by friends or family members or the pressure of hiding your sexuality can contribute to sadness, depression and anxiety.

It is these additional pressures that leave lesbian and bisexual women at a higher risk to depression, however feeling sad or depressed may not be linked to your sexuality at all.

There is a natural tendency to want to avoid feeling sad and a social pressure to be upbeat and happy all of the time. However most times, particularly when we know what has caused us to feel sad, the way to make sadness go away is to allow ourselves to feel it rather than distracting ourselves away from it. Talking to a good listener can help significantly. Remember sadness is a normal feeling just like happiness. It only becomes a

problem if sadness begins to affect your everyday life. If feelings of sadness don't go away then you should talk to your GP or health practitioner.

Recognising Depression

Sometimes feeling sad is a symptom of depression, which is a mental health condition that affects your thinking, energy, feelings and behaviour. It can vary from mild to severe and therefore the impact of depression on your life can vary from minimal to debilitating.



Remember the Golden Health Tip:

**Talk about your feelings and ask for help.
Asking for help is a sign of strength!**

The main symptoms of depression are:

- * Feeling tired, fatigued and having low energy even after sleep
- * Feeling sad, anxious or bored
- * Sleep difficulties – too much, too little or interrupted sleep
- * Difficulty in concentrating or thinking
- * Low self-esteem and feelings of guilt
- * Lack of interest in social life or things you usually enjoy
- * Physical pains that have no physical cause
- * Negative view of life and the future
- * Thoughts of death, loss of interest in living or suicidal thoughts

We all have some of these symptoms at times in our lives but if you are experiencing five or more of them for more than two weeks then you should talk to your GP or seek professional advice.



Feeling Lonely

Loneliness is a feeling that intimacy, understanding, friendship and acceptance are missing in your life. It is a feeling of isolation or separation from others. They are there, you can see and talk to them but you feel that they are socially and emotionally far away to you. We are already 'different' and it is easy to become isolated in that difference. However, loneliness is a feeling and feelings can change.

Loneliness is painful and it is very possible to be lonely in a crowd of people. Because of this, simply being with people does not necessarily stop us feeling

lonely. Research has consistently found that lesbian and bisexual women, particularly as they get older, are more likely to suffer from loneliness than heterosexual women. Understanding loneliness a little more helps to guide what we need to do to feel less lonely. It would be fantastic if, when you are feeling very lonely, someone would come and knock on your door and offer the things you are missing, fantastic but very unlikely. In reality these things are gained by you offering them to others. When you offer things they are returned to you.

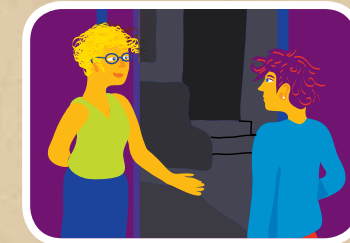


To gain friendship offer friendship
To gain understanding offer understanding
To gain acceptance offer acceptance
To gain intimacy offer intimacy

Studies in the Netherlands show that having a Lesbian/Bisexual social network significantly reduces the experience of loneliness. LINC or your local LGBT centre/group offers numerous opportunities, through groups and activities, to engage with others. The most difficult part is to turn up and then actually take the step to open up to others and engage with them in these situations rather than waiting for others to open up to you or engage with you. Staff in the centres, the Lesbian Line or any of the resources listed on the last page will help you. It may feel like you are taking a huge risk, but you have nothing to lose and everything to gain.

Opening the Door of LINC

"The first time I just looked at the door from the other side of the road. The second time was ages after. I walked up to the door but couldn't open it. The third time someone came out just as I got to the door. They held it open for me and smiled. I still remember that smile. It (LINC) was my first safe space where I could be me and meet others like me"



Feeling Suicidal

Feeling that you would rather be dead than living life as it is at the moment is one of the most difficult feelings. Trying to communicate or explain this feeling to someone is one of the most difficult tasks. In the LINC health survey 49% of respondents reported that they had thought about killing themselves, and 14% had attempted suicide. Many people experience suicidal thoughts and feelings.

There are many reasons for feeling suicidal including; depression, anxiety, relationship problems, financial worries and bereavement. Your sexuality may or may not be related to suicidal feelings. Regardless of the cause, when feeling suicidal it is very often difficult or impossible to think or believe that life will ever get any

better. If you are feeling suicidal this is a sign of how much you would like things to change in your life. With the right support you can make positive changes, find solutions to problems and move beyond feeling suicidal.

Talking to someone is very hard but choose a person, a friend, your GP, the staff in LINC or your local LGBT centre, or one of the helplines listed at the back of this leaflet. Choose someone you trust, take a deep breath and just say it. If you have difficulty in finding the words, write down how you are feeling and hand over what you have written. The person you choose may not be able to fix things for you but they will help you find the resources you need to try to feel differently.

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If you, or someone you know, is in urgent need or in crisis and need to talk to someone now:

- * Contact your GP. If you don't have a GP you can find a local doctor listed under 'General Practitioners' in the Golden Pages or visit www.icgp.ie
- * Go to, or contact, the Accident and Emergency Department of your nearest general hospital
- * Contact the emergency services by calling 999 or 112
- * Contact the Samaritans on 1850 60 90 90 (Republic of Ireland) or 08457 909 090 (Northern Ireland)

If you are feeling suicidal then please do not try to cope with this feeling alone. Talk to someone.

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Self-Harm

Self-harm is inflicting injury or harm on yourself as a way of dealing with emotional distress. Hurting yourself when you are feeling overwhelmed is a method that some people use to cope with problems. It appears to help you express feelings that you cannot find words for, release emotional pain or distract you from your life. The relief that comes from hurting yourself makes you feel better, but usually only for a little while. The relief is only temporary because the self-harm doesn't solve the problems, in fact it usually adds to them because it can create a feeling of shame and a need to keep the harming behaviour a secret because people won't understand.

There is a lack of understanding of self-harm. To outsiders the notion of hurting yourself to relieve pain may not make sense. As a consequence many myths surround self-harm, the predominant being that people who self-harm are 'just seeking attention'. If this were true, no one would hide self-harming behaviour whereas the LINC health survey identified that 24% of

participants had self-harmed and the Supporting LGBT Lives study found that 50% of people who had self-harmed had told nobody.

Self-harm can feel like an addiction, you want to stop but don't know how to or feel that you can't stop because it is the only thing enabling you to cope. The perception of others' reactions can make seeking help very difficult, but help is there for you. If you want to stop and you cannot stop on your own take the first step of confiding in someone you trust and can talk to. It doesn't have to be someone close to you, it should be someone who can support you or help you find help.



Steps to help you overcome Self-Harm

- * Getting appropriate help
- * Figuring out why you self-harm
- * Finding alternative coping strategies that work for you
- * Health professionals (counsellors, GPs) have a lot of experience in helping people to overcome self-harm and to learn alternative coping strategies



You deserve to feel better!

Coping with Relationship Difficulties

Most people in relationships experience difficulties from time to time. It is sometimes difficult to talk to anyone about problems in a relationship without feeling that a partner is being betrayed.

The general advice to people in relationship difficulty is to keep talking. Whilst this is true, the kernel of communication difficulties tends to lie in the area of listening! It is challenging but important to listen without being defensive. It is equally important to talk in a manner that does not accuse the other. Both should own and share what they are feeling themselves. Equal, healthy relationships need open honest talking and listening delivered with respect for the others views and feelings.

This is how I felt...



I hear you.

The LINC Health Survey identified the main two issues affecting quality of relationships was time together and sex. Financial security can also impact on relationship quality.



Listen!

When talking about difficult issues a couple should arrange a suitable time for both to discuss the issue. The speaker should:

- * Try to say how the issue is affecting them and what they feel about it
- * Start sentences with 'I' instead of 'you'
- * Talk about the real issue, rather than smaller insignificant things
- * Avoid dredging up all past arguments
- * Avoid trying to score points

The listener should:

- * Hear what is being said from the perspective of the other, try to imagine how they are feeling
- * Acknowledge and respond to how the other is feeling before continuing

Both should:

- * Try to identify solutions together
- * Be open to learning new ways of behaving and communicating in a relationship
- * Be open to compromise - remember compromise is not giving up the things that are important to you or allowing yourself to be harmed, it is about being flexible with issues that are less important
- * Aim for win win solution

These tips also apply to relationships with friends, family and children!

Coping with Financial Difficulties

The recession has affected many people, causing financial pain with redundancies, wage cuts, cuts in social welfare and increasing bills. A very human response to financial crisis is to ignore the difficulties and hope they go away. Whilst this is understandable it is not advisable for either financial or emotional health.

Help to sort out financial difficulties is available free from the Money Advice and Budgeting Service (MABS). MABS will not discriminate against you because you are a lesbian/lesbian couple/same sex family. By law they will offer the same service to you as any other person.



Tips for coping with financial difficulties:

- * Draw up a very honest budget accounting for all income and outgoings (may need to adjust on luxuries but include some social activity funds)
- * Prioritise mortgage/rent, utilities (gas/electric/phone)
- * If you do have debts, determine how much you can afford to pay off
- * Write to companies you owe money to and tell them what you propose to pay

- * Open all letters and respond to them
- * Avoid borrowing wherever possible
- * Stick to the budget!
- * Check online for information on budgeting and money management



Remember to de-stress!

Eating, Sleeping & Exercise

Food, sleep and exercise are key components of physical and mental health. Whilst we all know this, do you actually eat well, sleep enough and do enough exercise? Making the effort to eat 5 portions of fruit & vegetables a day, reducing sweet things and doing 3 hours of moderate exercise a week is recommended for maintaining health.

Sleep allows your body to rest and energy levels to be restored but sleep is also an active state that affects both physical and mental well-being. On average you need about 7-8 hours sleep a day. If your sleep patterns change and sleeping issues begin to affect your ability to carry out your everyday activities then you should contact your GP or health practitioner.



Tips for staying asleep

- * Stop thinking, worrying, or stimulating the brain in any way
- * Avoid getting annoyed
- * Aim to relax the body rather than trying to sleep
- * If you're not asleep within about 20 minutes, get up but keep the lights low and engage in a non-stimulating activity such as reading
- * Avoid alcohol as initially it makes you sleepy but acts as a stimulant a few hours later and decreases the quality of sleep



Tips for getting to sleep

- * Avoid the enemies of sleep before bedtime: stimulants, complex thinking, worrying, TV
- * Develop a regular sleep schedule
- * Develop a good sleeping environment: comfortable bed in a cool, dark room
- * Only use your bed for sleeping and sex
- * Manage stress and anxiety
- * Develop a 'going to bed' routine/ritual so your body knows you are about to sleep
- * Develop some relaxation techniques like deep breathing, muscle relaxation or visualisation
- * Take a warm bath with relaxing oils
- * Eat well and exercise during the day

Remember – what works for some might not work for others. Stress affects falling asleep and staying asleep so improved stress management can significantly improve sleep.



Talking to Health Practitioners

Being lesbian or bisexual is not a direct cause of any illness but it can have an indirect influence on your health. For example, lesbian and bisexual women may be at increased risk for some illness such as cervical and breast cancer. Because of this indirect influence it is important that your GP or other healthcare professional knows your sexual orientation. If you can't talk openly and honestly to your doctor when you need to, then it is important to find another doctor that you can be open with.

You should be aware that your relationships with your GP, health professionals, counsellors, mental health practitioners and social workers are confidential with respect to other members of your family.

There are on-going initiatives to raise awareness of LGBT issues with health practitioners. LINC or your local LGBT centre/group will provide you with details of LGBT friendly health service providers.

The LINC Health Survey found that 59% of women were 'out' to their GP. Reassuringly, 92% of those out to their GP found this 'easy'. Of those not out to their GP the majority indicated 'it had never come up', however 10% feared coming out to their GP mainly because the GP treated other members of the family.

You are entitled to good healthcare!



How could I say it...

Research has shown that a number of people visit their GP in the week before they complete suicide but do not tell their doctor that they are feeling suicidal. It can be difficult to find the words to tell your health practitioner how you are feeling or to come out to them. The sentences below may help.

"this is hard to talk about – I need to tell you that I have been thinking about ending my life"

"there is something else I need to tell you, it may not be directly relevant but I want you to be aware that I am a lesbian"

"when I feel I can't cope I hurt myself to relieve the pain"

"I have been feeling very down and the feelings don't go away"

"there are a number of things going on for me and I want to tell you about all of them"

Support Services

Mental Health and Addiction Support Services

LGBT Mental Health Information (National Office for Suicide Prevention)

www.lgbtmentalhealth.ie

Look After Yourself, Look After Your Mental Health:

LGBT Information Booklet
(Available at www.healthpromotion.ie)

Samaritans:

1850 609090 | www.samaritans.org | jo@samaritans.org

Childline:

1800 666666 | www.childline.ie

Teenline:

1800 833634 | www.teenline.ie

Aware (Depression):

1890 303302 | www.aware.ie | wecanhelp@aware.ie

Pieta House (self-Harm/Suicide Support)

01-6010000 | www.pieta.ie | mary@pieta.ie

Bodywhys (Eating Disorders):

1890 200444 | www.bodywhys.ie | alex@bodywhys.ie

Console (Suicide Bereavement Support):

1800 201890 | www.console.ie

Grow (Mental Health Support Groups):

1890 474474 | www.grow.ie

Alcoholics Anonymous:

www.alcoholicsanonymous.ie

Mental Health Ireland

www.mentalhealthireland.ie

Citizens Information Service

076-107400 | www.citizensinformationboard.ie

Support Services

Support for Young LGBT People

BeLong To Youth Services:

01-6706223 | info@belongto.org
For a full list of LGBT youth supports around the country please see www.belongto.org

UP Cork LGBT Youth Group

LINC 021-4808600 | www.linc.ie

LGBT Helplines

LGBT National Helpline:

1890 929 539 | www.lgbt.ie

Cork Lesbian Line:

021-4318318 | Wednesday 6 pm – 8 pm

Dublin Lesbian Line:

01-8729911

Dundalk Outcomers Helpline:

042-9353035

Gay Information Cork:

021-4271087

Gay Switchboard Dublin:

01-8721055

Limerick Gay & Lesbian Helpline:

061-310101

Outwest Helpline:

094-9372479

TENI Helpline (Transgender Support):

01-8733575 | www.teni.ie

Numbers for all LGBT helplines can be found at www.lgbt.ie

Support Services

LGBT Centres and Groups

Dundalk Outcomers:

042-9329816 | www.outcomers.org

Gay Men's Health Service:

01-8734952 | gmhpoutreach@eircom.net

LINC (Advocating for Lesbian and Bisexual Women in Ireland):

021-4808600 | www.linc.ie

The Other Place (Cork):

021-4278470 | www.theotherplacecork.com

Outhouse Community Centre Dublin:

01-8734932 | www.outhouse.ie

Outwest Ireland:

087-9725586 | www.outwestireland.ie

Rainbow Support Service Midwest:

061-310101 | www.rainbowsupportservices.org

South Waterford:

086-2147633 | www.southgroup.wetpaint.com

Transgender Equality Network Ireland (TENI):

01-8733575 | www.teni.ie

Support for Parents

LOOK (Parent Support):

087-2537699 | www.lovingouroutkids.org

Parent Support in Cork:

Ber Nolan 087-7902230 | info@gayprojectcork.com

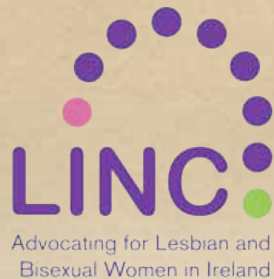
Financial Support Services

Mabs (Money, Advice and Budgeting Service)

076-1072000 | www.mabs.ie

Notes

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal blue lines, resembling notebook paper. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.



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