

Bi+ Mental Health

Bisexual activist Robyn Ochs created the most widely used definition of bisexual: "I call myself bisexual because I acknowledge that I have in myself the potential to be attracted-romantically and/or sexually-to people of more than one gender, not necessarily at the same time, in the same way, or to the same degree." Bi+ is an umbrella term encompassing a wide range of identities that describe a person who has attraction to more than one gender (such as bisexual, pansexual, multisexual, and others). Just as there are many ways to be straight, gay, lesbian, or asexual, there are as many ways to be bi+ as there are bi+ people. Language is contextual and individual; moving beyond singular definitions helps us honor the expansive ways bi+ people talk about themselves. This is not intended to be an exhaustive guide, but here is an overview of some experiences and disparities bi+ folks encounter, along with clinical tips for supporting your clients with bi+ identities.

An Invisible Majority

Bisexual people are an invisible majority of the LGBTQ+ community, meaning 54% of LGB adults and 75% of LGB young people identify as bi+, but they are less likely to feel comfortable disclosing their identity to others.⁹ A recent study found that only 19% of bisexual adults were out to the important people in their lives (versus 75% of gay or lesbian people). Bi+ people experience unique stressors related to their identity stemming from bi+ erasure, monosexism, and binegativity.

Bi+ Erasure: Act of ignoring or denying people who identify as bi+, or minimize experiences of bi+ people.

Monosexism: A system of oppression that encourages the belief that a person cannot be attracted to more than one gender, or that attraction to more than one gender is less valid than monosexual identities (such as gay, lesbian, or straight).

Bi+ Negativity: Also referred to as biphobia, negative attitudes and stereotypes about bi+ people.

Substance Use & Mental Health Disparities



29.9%

Percent of bi+ People Reporting Alcohol Use Disorders¹⁰



26.4%

Percent of bi+ Men Using Multiple Substances¹⁰



33.1%

Percent of bi+ Women Using Multiple Substances¹⁰

85%

of bi+ youth report "usually" feeling worried, nervous, or panicked⁷

81%

of bi+ youth report "usually" feeling depressed⁷

Bi+ people have elevated rates of

prescription opioid misuse⁸

68%

of bi+ youth report being treated poorly at school because of their sexual orientation⁷

Only 12%

of bi+ men feel safe coming out to the most important people in their lives²

Bullying is linked to substance use among bi+ youth⁸

Bi+ People Experience Heightened Rates of Sexual Assault & Intimate Partner Violence

79.3% of bi+ women & 56.4% of bi+ men have experienced unwanted sexual contact in their lifetime³



69.3% of bi+ women & 56.4% of bi+ men have experienced sexual violence, physical violence, and/or stalking victimization by an intimate partner³



Bi+ Minority Stress

Some common experiences bi+ people face that contribute to negative mental health outcomes can include:

- Feeling a constant need to come out or explain their identity to others
- Having others minimize their experiences or deny the legitimacy of their identity as a "phase"
- Being questioned about genders of current or past partners to prove their identity
- Being excluded from LGBTQ+ spaces or told they are not "queer enough" to belong in these spaces
- A false assumption that they are more likely to contract and expose a partner to sexually transmitted infections
- Pressure from a partner to change their identity to "match" their partner's

Dating & Relationships

Bi+ people have unique stressors related to dating and relationships, as they are more likely than lesbian, gay, or straight people to have a partner who does not share their orientation. While a romantic relationship is usually considered a protective factor for mental and behavioral health, bi+ individuals may actually experience **increased** minority stress in relationships where their partner does not understand or affirm their bi+ identity. They may have fears around disclosing their identity to a partner that their partner will reject them view them as untrustworthy. If not in a relationship, many bi+ people face these types of stigma from potential romantic or sexual partners based on assumptions and stereotypes that the bi+ person will be more likely to be disloyal.

The Intersection of Bi+ & Transgender Identities

The 2015 U.S. Transgender Survey from the National Center for Transgender Equality found that 1/3 (32%) of transgender people surveyed identified as Bisexual or Pansexual.¹¹



Younger transgender people ages 18-24 were more likely to identify as bisexual or pansexual¹¹



36%



26%

Only 26% of transgender people ages 65 and older identified as bisexual or pansexual¹¹

Biracial/Multiracial transgender people are more likely to identify as bisexual or pansexual¹¹



34%



42%

42% of bisexual or pansexual transgender people reported having a disability¹¹

Tips for How to be a Bi+ Affirming Provider

Check your assumptions & be aware of bi+ erasure in language. You can't assume a person's orientation by the gender of their partner. Bi+ people may be in couples that "look" straight or gay. Instead of saying "the gay and lesbian couples I work with," try "the LGBTQ+ couples I work with." Aim to make your practice bi+ inclusive for all.

Follow your client's lead on language they use to describe themselves.

Terms and definitions provide a baseline of understanding, but they can't give you the full picture. Bi+ people live full, complex lives. Labels with narrow definitions can feel confining for many.

Listen & double down on validation!

Bi+ individuals have frequent experiences of people in their lives not believing them about their own feelings and experiences. Set the stage for them to feel comfortable expressing and exploring feelings without having to justify them.

Consider bi+ specific experiences independently.

Bi+ individuals have different needs and experiences that can be missed with a "one size fits all" approach that lumps bi+ folks in with gay and lesbian clients. Learn about bi+ specific supports and resources in your local area or online that you can connect clients to.

Get comfortable talking about sexuality in ways that are holistic & allow for fluidity.

Society makes assumptions about identity and attraction based on behavior; however, sexuality is so much more complicated. Tools like the Attraction Identity Behavior (AIB) Model can provide a framework that allows for a client to talk about the ways their sexuality shows up in real life for them.

Help clients explore their bi+ affirming supports.

Bi+ people experience stigma from both inside and outside of the LGBTQ+ community. A recent study of bi+ people in relationships found that 2/3 of respondents experienced neutral messages from their partner while only 1/3 experienced positive messages of affirmation about their bi+ identity.

Be mindful of intersectional & cultural considerations.

Bi+ men face a particular invisibility due to negative societal messages. A substantial portion of bi+ individuals are also BIPOC; however, many LGBTQ+ spaces are not affirming for BIPOC or bi+ individuals. Support your bi+ client in exploring what spaces, people, and supports feel affirming to them in all of their identities.

Continue learning! Read work by diverse bi+ authors, and check out more resources in the [National SOGIE Center's list of Resources for Supporting the Bisexual Community.](#)

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