

there is a degree of shame in that very thought. The reality is that not all our guests would be comfortable about it. We don't advertise the fact we are a couple. It feels safer that way."

Her partner Sarah Martin, a former GP, adds: "When I was practising, I had so many lesbian patients who had been through depression, which was often as a result of keeping a secret for a long time."

Mental health issues can be exacerbated by substance abuse, she notes. "It's also known that there is a higher rate of alcohol and cannabis use amongst LGBT people, which can trigger mental illness, which then becomes part of a dual diagnosis. It's very common for mental health issues to improve when the substance abuse stops."

Even finding help can be problematic: "There are issues around who you can trust. Many LGBT people don't trust their doctor and don't seek help in time since they are so used to dealing with problems on their own."

Recent research concludes that bisexual women have an even higher incidence of mental health issues than lesbians. Our culture tends to assume that people are either gay or straight, so bi people suffer from lack of visibility as well as stereotypes that depict them as greedy, promiscuous and untrustworthy. Many face double discrimination from both straight and lesbian/gay communities, which can jeopardise their mental health since they can feel that they have nowhere

to turn for support and acceptance.

The new research addresses the findings in a 2007 Stonewall survey of lesbian and bi women's health, concentrating on the bisexual respondents. It found that bi women are more likely than lesbians to report eating problems, self-harm, depressed feelings and anxiety, even though they appeared less likely to be out about their sexual orientation and experienced less sexuality-based discrimination.

"Bisexual respondents may have concealed their sexual orientation more deeply, because they experienced greater felt and/or internalised stigma than lesbians," state the researchers, adding that "concealment is known to be related to poorer mental health in sexual minority women". Other studies have shown that bi women are less likely than lesbians to receive support from family or mental health professionals, and are less likely to engage with LGBT community events and services.

Dr Meg John Barker, a senior lecturer in Psychology at the Open University and co-author of *The Bisexuality Report*, notes that that mental health issues may well be higher amongst older bi people since there is often an even greater tendency for them to be invisible. "Older people in general are often seen as not having a sexuality and bisexual life-histories can often be re-written by friends/families/carers to ignore that person's same-sex relationships and only focus on the other-sex ones."

They added that, "Coming out can

be a little more complex for bi people. On the whole, it's definitely good for mental health for people to be open about themselves. However, for a lot of bi people, they find they are re-closeted by the people who they come out to, who won't believe that they are really bi, or who feel threatened by it".

There is no doubt that recent legislation has contributed to increased acceptance of LGBT people, but has that resulted in a decline in mental illness and distress?

"No, I don't think it has," says Jeremy Taylor, head of policy at Stonewall. "What we've probably got better at though is talking about mental health – taking it from a taboo to being able to speak about it openly."

Mental illness itself can result in prejudice and discrimination, he points out, with LGBT people effectively carrying a double burden. "There is still lots of work to do and many people with mental health issues face discrimination from employers, friends and family but we are definitely on the right track."

So, let's keep talking. **D**

Mental Health Awareness Week, 11-17 May

mentalhealth.org.uk

pacehealth.org.uk

Poorer Mental Health In UK Bisexual Women Than Lesbians: Evidence From The UK 2007 Stonewall Women's Health Survey

tinyurl.com/BiWomenMentalHealth

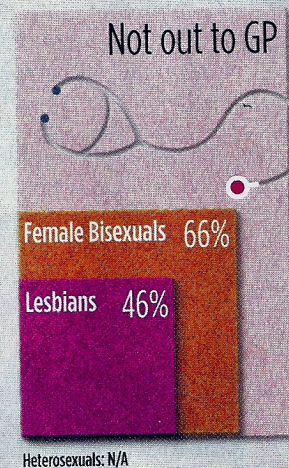
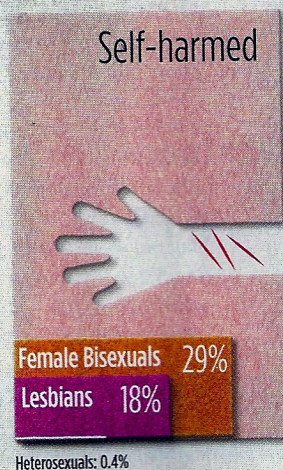
The Bisexuality Report, 2012

tinyurl.com/TheBisexualityReport

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"Depression was often the result of keeping a secret for a long time"

Graph: Measuring the impact of prejudice



Source: Stonewall Survey