

UNDER STRICT EMBARGO

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SECRET LOVES, HIDDEN LIVES?

The mental, emotional and sexual health of people with learning difficulties who are gay, lesbian and bisexual is being jeopardised by the failure of many services to give the support needed in this area.

New research by academics at Bristol University's Norah Fry Research Centre, working in partnership with Terrence Higgins Trust and REGARD, found significant barriers were put in the way of people with learning difficulties exercising their human rights to consenting same sex relationships.

The barriers included:

- **Experiences of discrimination, harassment and bullying:** Virtually every person with a learning difficulty who took part in the research said they had been bullied or harassed as a direct result of their sexuality. Much of the verbal abuse came from close family members. Half of the people interviewed had been physically or verbally abused by strangers on the street or on public transport. Experiences of depression and loneliness featured heavily in people's accounts. Two men spoke about trying to commit suicide and one woman had self harmed and thought about suicide.
- **Lack of support:** People wanted support to meet other gay, lesbian and bisexual people, go to pubs and clubs and groups and find boyfriends and girlfriends. However, the gay scene was felt by many to be unwelcoming and many staff were reluctant to see this work as part of their jobs.
- A failure on the part of many services who support people with learning difficulties to talk about, or do work on, sexuality and relationships and meet the required standards in this area. However, a small number of staff, in a minority of services, were doing thoughtful and innovative work.

Despite these barriers the desire to meet and get to know other people was one of the strongest messages from the research. Most people wanted to fall in love and have more gay and lesbian friends.

David Abbott, Research Fellow at the Norah Fry Research Centre, said: “Despite the very many messages telling men and women with learning difficulties that it is a problem for them to be sexual at all – never mind gay, lesbian, or bisexual – people were forging their lives and identities and striving to lead full sexual and emotional lives.

“However, much work needs to be done to ensure that the human rights of people with learning difficulties who are gay, lesbian or bisexual are upheld and supported.”

Sue Peters, Regional Manager at Terrence Higgins Trust West, added: “This research has uncovered much of what was previously hidden in the lives and experiences of people with learning difficulties.

“I am sure there are more challenges ahead before this issue can be said to be properly tackled.”

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Note to editors:

The partners in this research, generously supported by The Big Lottery Fund, were the Norah Fry Research Centre at the University of Bristol, www.bris.ac.uk/Depts/NorahFry/; Terrence Higgins Trust, www.tht.org.uk/; and REGARD, www.regard.dircon.co.uk/.

A summary of the research findings and an ‘easy to read’ version is available for downloading, free of charge, from Wednesday 13 April on the ‘online documents’ section of the Norah Fry website, go to www.bris.ac.uk/Depts/NorahFry/

Secret loves, hidden lives? Exploring issues for people with learning difficulties who are gay, lesbian or bisexual by David Abbott and Joyce Howarth is published by The Policy Press and is available from Marston Book Services on tel +44 (0)1235 465500; fax +44 (0)1235 465556; email direct.orders@marston.co.uk.

In the USA, copies are available from International Specialized Book Services (ISBS) on tel +1 800 944 6190; fax +1 503 280 8832; email info@isbs.com

A lunchtime talk, *Secret loves, hidden lives?*, will take place on Tuesday 3 May in the Southville Centre, Beaufort Road, Bristol, between 12.30 to 1.45 pm. The talk is open to everyone and will appeal particularly to people with an interest in learning difficulties. To book your place contact Maggi Walton on tel (0117) 331 0987.

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