

# Breaking Down Barriers to Mental Health Supports for LGBTQ+ Youth through Group Work



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# Learning Objectives

## **Learning Objective 1:**

Describe highlights of collaborative community-based group work research that promotes LGBTQ+ youth mental health and enhances coping skills

## **Learning Objective 2:**

Develop a deeper understanding of, and strategies to deliver, culturally-adapted mindfulness group interventions for LGBTQ+ youth

# Study Purpose

- This grounded theory exploratory study examined the potential utility of an **adapted group mindfulness-based intervention (MBI) for LGBTQ+ youth, 16-29 years**

## Study Aims:

- 1) Practice core mindfulness skills with youth to experience mindfulness — from evidence-based mindfulness-based interventions (e.g., MBSR-Teens; Mindful Self-Compassion)
- 2) Investigate useful approaches and collaboratively develop an adapted affirmative group MBI with engaged LGBTQ+ youth

# Context: Intersecting Vulnerabilities among LGBTQ+ Youth

- Particularly vulnerable group — tend to exhibit poorer psychological outcomes compared to non-LGBTQ+ youth
- Report significantly higher rates of mental health issues (e.g., co-occurring depression, anxiety, suicidality, substance use) compared to non-LGBTQ+ peers
- Vulnerabilities often rooted in discriminatory, unfriendly and hostile climates in their home, schools and communities
- Despite high rates of challenges, few evidence-informed interventions target the effects of these climates

**Early interdisciplinary interventions are greatly needed to prevent the loss of psychological health in LGBTQ+ youth and address risk factors**

Benibgui, 2011; Craig & Austin, 2016; Hatzenbuehler, McLaughlin, & Xuan, 2012; Marshal et al., 2008; Scou



# Context: Need for Community-Based Group Interventions

- Lack of evidence-informed interventions for LGBTQ+ youth that are initiated by/engaged with community
- May be better served by school or community-based programs *created specifically* to minimize their distress
- Community-based interventions may capture LGBTQ+ youth not in other systems of care
- Group approaches widely used and important for LGBTQ+ populations — can help with reducing isolation and fostering a sense of connection to others



# Systematic Intervention Development: Adapt & Evaluate Framework

- Aims to enhance interventions by developing greater cultural congruence for minority groups
- Intervention development from the “ground up”, with the voices and needs of community stakeholders (LGBTQ+ youth)

## ***First steps (Completed):***

- 1) Conduct individual interviews/focus groups with LGBTQ+ youth to inform intervention development (sample intervention)
- 2) Develop a manual (infusion of mindfulness and LGBTQ+ affirmative content) (**draft completed**)

## **Next steps:**

- 3) Open pilot feasibility study
- 4) “Living” manual refinement
- 5) RCT/Quasi-experimental design

# So, Mindfulness...It's Popular!



# What is it?

“Mindfulness means paying attention in a particular way; On purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally.”

*Openhearted approach, bringing kindness, self-compassion, friendliness to your experience*

-Jon Kabat-Zinn  
Founder of Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR)





# How does it work?

- Cultivate attention to internal and external experiences — cultivating curiosity and openness
- Heightens body awareness — helps detect physiological aspects of stressful states (e.g. body tension, rapid heartbeat, short shallow breath)
- Triggers emotion regulation process — responding to stimulus differently (e.g., noticing it as opposed to reacting to it; internal barometer)
- Increased dopamine release (and other feel-good chemicals)
- Breaks harmful thinking patterns which lead to depression and other mental health challenges

# Regular Practice Cultivates 3 Core Skills

- **Concentration**: The ability to focus and stabilize one's attention
- **Sensory Clarity**: The ability to keep track of the components of sensory experience as they arise, moment-by-moment
- **Equanimity**: The ability to 'be with' experience with an attitude of gentleness and balance



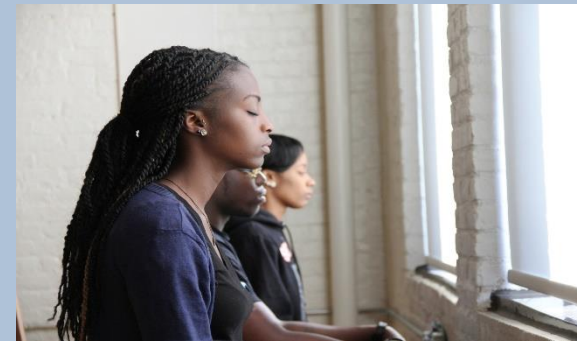
# Informal vs Formal

- Informal “everyday” mindfulness — focusing your mind to ***any activity you are doing*** during your day. (e.g. brushing your teeth, cooking, cleaning, etc.)
- Formal mindfulness (meditation) — taking time out of your day to complete a meditation practice (e.g. body scan, mindfulness of the breath, mindful yoga, etc.)

# Why Mindfulness for LGBTQ+ Mental Health

- Growing body of literature strongly suggests that empirically supported group MBIs for youth — including marginalized youth — provide solid mental health coping skills, and enhances self-compassion and resiliency
- Shown to reduce reports of co-occurring symptoms commonly reported in LGBTQ+ youth literature (e.g. depression and anxiety)
- Some research with LGBTQ+ communities — mindfulness and self-compassion beneficial in resolving psychological distress, supporting coming out process, addressing psychosocial stressors

(Chandler, 2013; Crews, 2012; Fritzges, 2015; Gayner et al., 2012; Kashdan, 2010; Pachankis, 2014; Tan, 2008; Semple, Lee, Rosa, & Miller, 2010; Semple & Burke, 2012; Tan & Yarhouse, 2010; Yadavaia & Hayes, 2012)



# An LGBTQ-Affirmative Foundation

- While not prescriptive, LGBTQ-affirmative practice provides general principles:
  - affirm LGBTQ identity
  - explore oppression and discrimination
  - increase stigma-related coping
  - a flexible approach that can incorporate mindfulness-based skills training
  
- Recent promising studies have shown affirmative group interventions for LGBTQ+ youth associated with **significant increases in self-efficacy, self-esteem, proactive coping; improved depression, well-being**
  - however, further systematic investigation is needed as research in this area is relatively new

Austin & Craig, 2015; Craig & Austin, 2016



# Research Questions

- 1) What are the overall experiences of LGBTQ+ youth ***while participating in a sample*** affirmative mindfulness-based group intervention?
- 2) What mindfulness skills and affirmative content might LGBTQ+ youth want to utilize in an affirmative mindfulness-based group intervention?

# Study Design & Methods

- 4 focus groups
- 6 semi-structured individual interviews
- Purposive sampling: 30 LGBTQ+ youth (ages 16-29)
- Each focus group session 2 hours in length — same youth participated in a series of 2 group sessions — Sherbourne Health, Toronto
- LGBTQ+ youth participated in a **simulated affirmative MBI** (group and individual formats)



# Participants

- Sample (N=30) — 57% = 16-19yrs.; 43% = 20-29 yrs.
- All youth from Greater Toronto Area (urban and suburban)

## Gender Identity:

- Woman (24%); Non-binary (24%); Man (16%); Transgender (12%), Two-Spirit (12%); Gender fluid (8%); Gender queer (4%)

## Sexual Identity:

- Gay (30%); Queer (25%); Bisexual (20%); Pansexual (15%); Lesbian (10%)

## Ethnicity/Racial Identity:

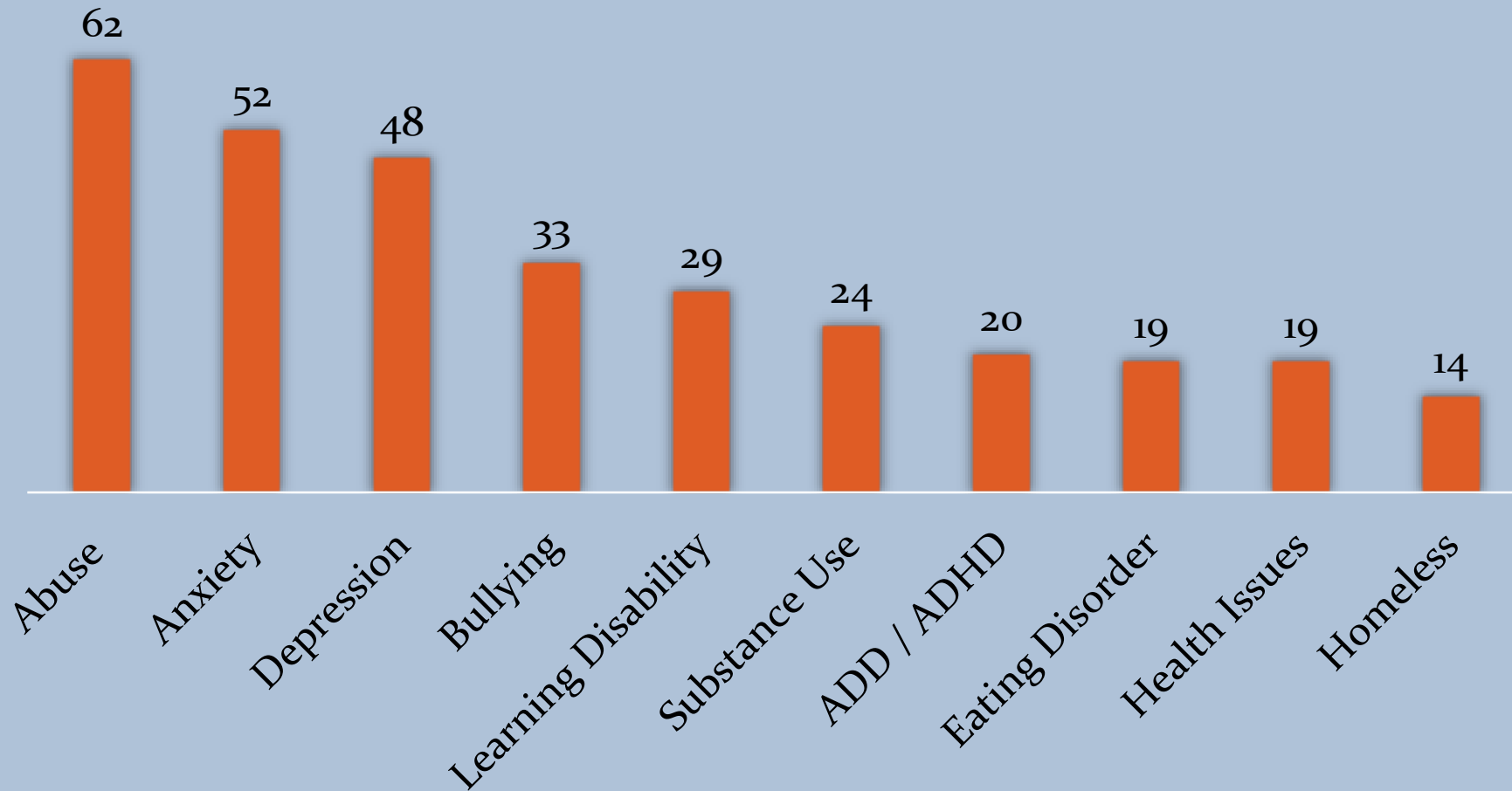
- Black (18%); White (41%); Indigenous (14%); Latin American (9%); South East Asian (4.5%); South Asian (4.5%); Middle-Eastern (4.5%); Mixed ethnic/racial identity (4.5%)

Categories are non-mutually exclusive





## RISK FACTORS



- Categories are non-mutually exclusive

# Data Collection

- **Self-Compassion Scale (SCS)** — 26-item measure of one's level of mindfulness and self-compassion,
  - suitable for ages 14 and up
- The SCS administered at beginning (n = 30) and end (n = 19) of the sample affirmative MBI to available SGMY. Some SGMY not available (e.g., had to leave a bit early; declined completing the measure; incomplete measure)
- Utilizing SCS allowed for complementing the qualitative data

# Mindfulness-Based Practices Utilized

## Some exercises based on MBSR-T

- Mindfulness and the five senses
- Bringing mindfulness to routine tasks
- Paying attention to your breath

## Exercises based on other programs (Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy; Mindful Self-Compassion; Making Friends With Yourself)

- Gratitude activity
- 3-Minute Breathing Space
- Soothing Touch (heart, hand, face, etc.)
- Self-Compassion Break



# Data Analysis

- Grounded theory analytic techniques used to determine patterns and themes in the data (Charmaz, 2014)
- Independently manually coded qualitative data (multiple coders) using open and focused coding, and constant comparison within and across data
- SCS data were analyzed to determine differences in mindfulness and self-compassion (i.e., mean scores for pre and post testing) using a paired sample t-test

# Results

## Self-Compassion Scale (Score of 1-5)

*Almost Never = 1; Occasionally = 2; About Half Of The Time = 3;  
Fairly Often = 4; Almost Always = 5*

**(N=30) Low to Moderate levels of:**

- Overall Self-Compassion = **2.6/5**
- Mindfulness = **2.8/5**
- Self-Kindness = **2.9/5**
- Common Humanity = **2.7/5**

***Potential opportunity to increase mindfulness  
and self-compassion among LGBTQ+ youth!***



# Results

LGBTQ+ youth participants (n = 19) reported significantly increased mindfulness (2.5 to 3.1) and self-compassion (2.3 to 2.9) at post testing.

*Pretest and Posttest Scores for the Sample Affirmative MBI Analyzed With Matched-Pairs T-Tests*

Outcome	Pretest		Posttest		t-test
	M	SD	M	SD	
Mindfulness	2.51	.524	3.08	1.031	-2.078*
Self-Compassion	2.32	.408	2.86	.729	-2.678*

Note. M = mean; SD = standard deviation. *t*-test significant at \* $p < .05$ .

Adapted exercises for LGBTQ+ youth shown to be beneficial for increasing mindfulness and self-compassion.



# Results

Overall *positive and beneficial* experience with mindfulness:

- *“But mindfulness can really yank you back and give you an objective view of what's going on”*
- *“It really brings you out of it...when getting lost in your own feelings”*
- *“It was definitely the first time that I, um, actually got something out of mindfulness”*

# Results

Three major themes emerged:

(1) The importance of psychological safety when practicing mindfulness

(2) The importance of cultivating awareness and acceptance to increase resilience and coping among LGBTQ+ youth

(3) Explicit focus on self-compassion essential for an LGBTQ+ youth affirmative mindfulness program



# Theme 1

## The importance of psychological safety when practicing mindfulness

- Trauma-informed approach: perception of this lacking in traditional MBIs
- *“I think that the fact that you took this approach it can be intersectional to other groups who carry trauma like for instance for me being Indigenous”*
- *“I’ve done mindfulness groups before but never takes into account my specific experiences of being trans”*



# Theme 1

The importance of psychological safety when practicing mindfulness: *practicing mindfulness in an LGBTQ+-affirming group context for LGBTQ+ youth*

## Possibilities:

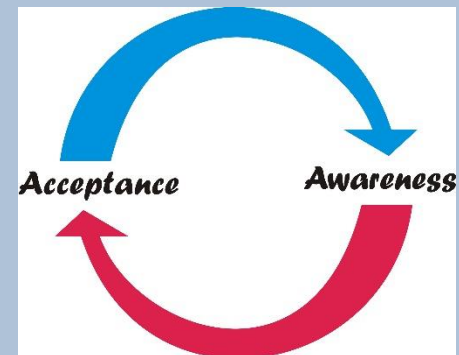
- Providing various objects to focus on (e.g., feet, stone, breath, sounds)
- Shorter practices (1-3 minutes; 3-5 minutes)
- option to keep eyes open
- establishing guidelines for safety
- Consistent stressing of option to opt
- explicit naming gender/sexual minority stress



# Theme 2

## The importance of cultivating awareness and acceptance to increase resilience and coping

- *“Something I do a lot when I have a particular thought or bad feeling, that you can't get over, you kind of let it wash over you, accept it, allow it to pass (referring to LGBTQ+ stigma)”*
- *“But when I accept and allow things to be, and think something over, it's not as unpleasant anymore, I can move forward” (referring to transphobia)*



# Theme 3



Explicit focus on self-compassion essential for an LGBTQ+ youth affirmative mindfulness program

## Sub-themes:

- 1) exploration of how to foster self-compassion despite anti-LGBTQ+ discrimination, internalized and intersectional marginalization (e.g., racism, sexism)
- 2) mindfulness allowing for direct embodied experience with self-compassion

# Theme 3



**Explicit focus on self-compassion essential for an LGBTQ+ youth affirmative mindfulness program**

- “As queer people, we need to talk about self-love and how to give ourselves compassion in these groups”
- “I feel like I bring soothing touch, kindness and awareness to pain with breathing and touching my face and my chest”

# Results

**Which LGBTQ+ and affirmative topics would you like to see covered?**

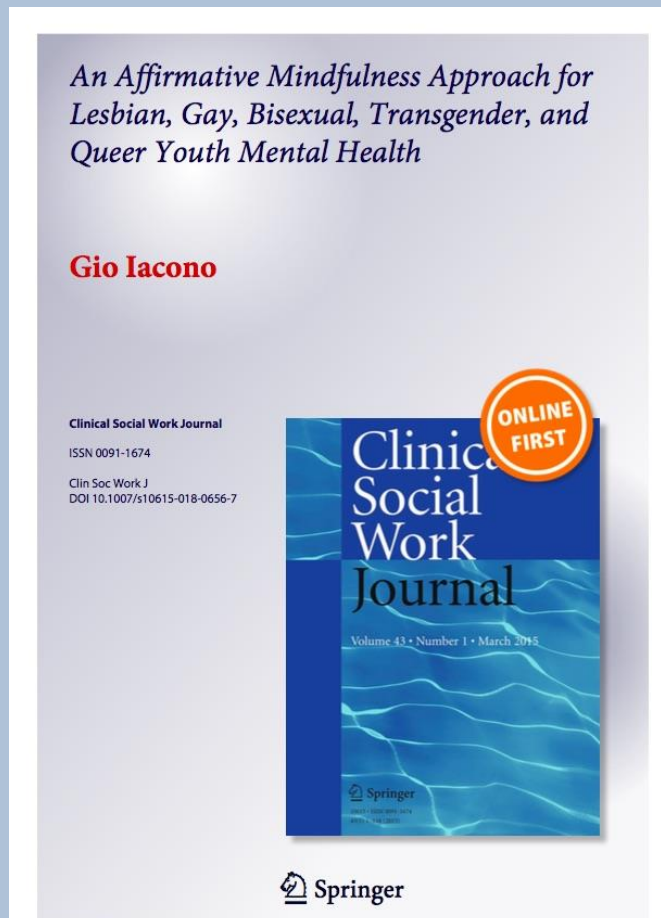
- coming out
- intersectionality
- explore actions that empower LGBTQ+ youth (e.g., advocacy, education)
- social support networks
- sexual health
- affirming activities and goals

# Conclusions

- **Early intervention:** May support LGBTQ+ youth with shifting negative perceptions, facilitating healthier behaviors, increasing a sense of self-compassion when experiencing stress
- Overwhelmingly positive response regarding mindfulness exercises within an affirmative therapeutic group context
- Importance of taking a trauma-informed approach
- Integrating mindfulness, self-compassion and affirmative practices may provide one effective approach for working with vulnerable LGBTQ+ youth



- Iacono, G. (2019). An Affirmative Mindfulness Approach for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer Youth Mental Health. *Clinical Social Work Journal*
- Clinical and conceptual guidance for use in various clinical community practice contexts
- Adaptable approach to orient LGBTQ+ youth to the present and enhance self-compassion and well-being





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# THANK YOU!

Questions?  
Ideas?

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<http://www.projectyouthaffirm.org/team.html>



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