

On the Plus+ Side



COMMUNITY DISCUSSION

Hosted by LGBT Health and Wellbeing with Pawel (co-organiser of Polyamory.Scot), Red (author of Down with the Sickness) and Tavi (LGBT Health and Wellbeing events volunteer); moderated by Jules Stapleton Barnes (Community Development Worker, LGBT Health and Wellbeing).

Event date: Saturday 25 April 2020

Event location: Online (Zoom)

www.lgbthealth.org.uk

THE EVENT

LGBT Health and Wellbeing host quarterly discussion events as part of their Community Programme in both Edinburgh and Glasgow. This event was intended to be an in-person community discussion in Edinburgh but instead took place online to comply with UK-wide social distancing restrictions.

The LGBTQ+ community uses a variety of acronyms to refer to different identities and sexualities that fall under the umbrella of a diverse community. While LGBTQ+ and similar acronyms are the most common, they do not include every branch of the community. How does it feel to identify with the "+" in LGBTQ+ acronyms? Does it represent or misrepresent? Is it an afterthought or inclusive? Members of the community gathered online to reflect on these questions for the quarterly community discussion. The event featured a panel discussion by Pawel (www.polyamory.scot), Tavi (LGBT Health and Wellbeing), and Red (www.rightdownwiththesickness.wordpress.com) followed by an open discussion between panellists and members of the community.

FINDING COMMUNITY IN A PANDEMIC

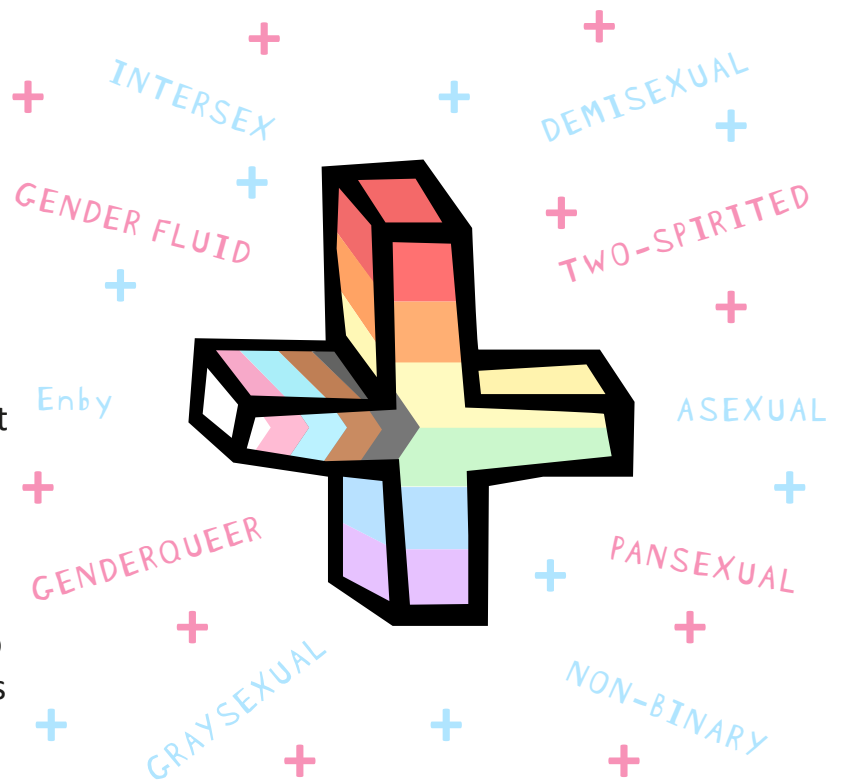
Community discussions are an important part of LGBT Health and Wellbeing's regular programme. This community discussion posed a unique challenge due to the UK-wide social distancing restrictions, in place in response to the Covid-19 pandemic.

The event was hosted online using Zoom with the goal of mimicking the trust, conversation and comradery of an in-person community discussion, as much as possible. Attendees were encouraged to use their cameras to foster a shared sense of community and security and they were able to use the Zoom chat function to interact with each other, ask for assistance and share relevant resources. The online audience interaction tool, Sli.do was also utilised. Attendees could partake in polls, add questions or comments, and ask for help.



THE IMPACT

This online event was an opportunity to discuss often overlooked identities, examine our use of labels within the LGBTQ+ community and listen to personal stories about how LGBTQ+ labels affect people. In addition to these learning opportunities, this event was also a way for people to connect with their community at a time when many people felt isolated. This was especially important for new members of the community who had not had the opportunity to access LGBTQ+ resources prior to the UK wide social distancing restrictions. The online format also allowed people to attend who may not normally be able to due to access barriers including physical disabilities, anxiety disorders or ambiguity around who is welcome at events.

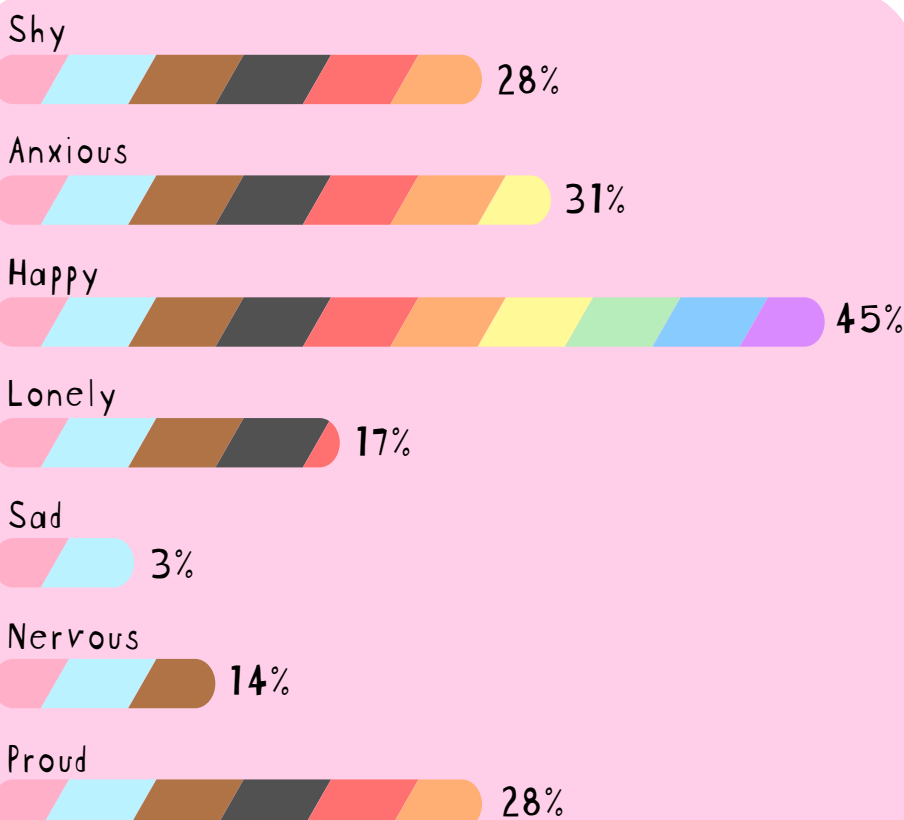


36 Participants

75% from Edinburgh

Approximately

How are you feeling?



At the start of the event, attendees were asked to share how they were feeling using an online poll. 29 people participated in the poll. This was a useful tool for the community to reflect on how each other were currently feeling, and what their needs might be during the event.

Attendees were then separated into small groups to introduce themselves using the Zoom breakout-rooms function. This allowed everyone to connect and established a more intimate atmosphere.

POLYAMORY AND LGBTQ+

"It can be an identity; emotional, romantic or sexual preference; a set of skills and values. I define it as an exercise in living relationships in a consensual, ethical, and responsible way, with no restriction of how many people are involved (none, one or many). It can be hard, but it's always beautiful." - Pawel, Polyamory.Scot

The discussion began with Pawel, co-organiser of Polyamory.Scot. Pawel has been involved in the polyamory community in Edinburgh for over seven years and sees polyamory as part of his identity, although it is different for everyone. Pawel spoke about polyamory as a set of tools that everyone can use for good communication and healthy relationships. He also discussed the overlap between the polyamory community and the LGBTQ+ community.

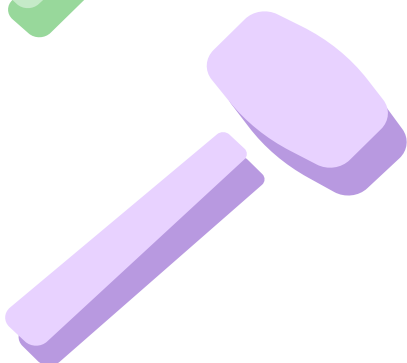


Q: (Community member) How can someone have a healthy polyamorous relationship? How can they build a community?

A: (Pawel) In Edinburgh, people started by meeting each other at events and there was a private Facebook group. Now, we have a public email. There is a balance between being as public as can be [and privacy]. Some members of the community had difficulties at work after being outed. However, it is important to talk about and exchange these experiences to grow.

Q: (Jules) How do you relate to your queer identity and polyamorous identity?

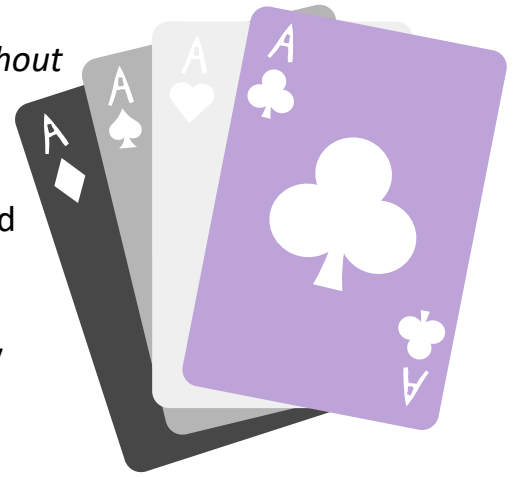
A: (Pawel) There is an interesting discussion of whether polyamory is an identity, preference, or social status. I see it as a set of tools that I wish all of my friends had, whether in a relationship with multiple people or one person. Owning your emotions. There is a huge overlap between LGBTQ+ and poly communities. This was my first time allowing myself to identify with my bi identity and I leaned on LGBT Health and Wellbeing, friends and support groups. Until Jules asked me to participate in this event, it was the first time I thought of poly as part of the LGBTQ+ umbrella. It is not my place to decide that. But I do feel there is a lot of overlap and we rely on a lot of the same resources.



"A" is for Asexuality

"I'm trans and ace, and if you look for me in fiction, I'm gone without a trace." - Tavi, LGBT Health and Wellbeing events volunteer

Tavi identifies as Asexual and non-binary. Often behind the scenes, they have been an important part of the LGBT Health and Wellbeing events volunteer team for years. They spoke on the issue of asexuality often being misrepresented or completely ignored in LGBTQ+ communities and the difficulties of seemingly conflicting identities and/or labels.



Q: (Jules) What does asexual mean?

A: (Tavi) Asexual is someone who has little to no sexual attraction. It is often lumped in with a medical condition, but it has nothing to do with your libido.

Q: (Jules) Did any of what Pawel said resonate with you?

A: (Tavi) Yes, a lot of the tools Pawel mentioned would be helpful for everyone. If you are asexual, you need that communication. Healthy communication is needed for one partner or many. You need to be able to set your boundaries and stick to them.

Q: (Jules) How do you feel about the "plus" sign?

A: (Tavi) It doesn't really bother me, but once you get beyond that "T", it becomes more ambiguous. Like when people claim that the "A" stands for "Allies" not ace (asexual) people.

Q: (Community member) Would you class asexuality as something you can go through for a period of time or does it need to be part of your entire life?

A: (Tavi) Like any of the labels, it is up to you to choose.

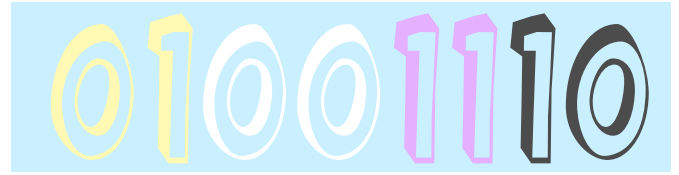
(Jules) we deal a lot in LGBT Health and Wellbeing with how people approach the use of labels and identity language. The label is for yourself, it's yours, but wider society wants to box you in, your rights, where you're allowed to be, etc.. We want to use labels that are comfortable for us, but that doesn't work for the rest of the world. It is up to everyone to decide for themselves.

"Being asexual and non-binary sometimes feels like peering into a dark room and looking for something that might not be there. When I was younger, I thought that looking into that absence was a bad thing, no sexual attraction, no gender, this must make me a monster. The lack of education and representation leaves us in that dark, and leaves other people not seeing our truths. Since I've started to explore my gender and my sexuality, to lose my doubts and my chains, I've always tried to bring the light of the awareness I've found in myself to other people - we are not monsters, or broken, or wrong. We are asexual, we are non-binary, we are whoever we want to be. We just have to teach and learn from each other, and spread that light to those trapped in the darkness of ignorance. Write your own story. Only you can define yourself."

- Tavi, LGBT Health and Wellbeing events volunteer

BEYOND THE "T": NON-BINARY

Many people shared the sentiment that for non-binary people, the "+" is not always inclusive as the "NB" part of the community is represented by the "T" (trans) in "LGBTQ+". Trans terminology is often very binary and some non-binary people are not comfortable using the term "trans" to describe themselves. There was also concern about accessing trans spaces and resources and a fear of invalidating other people's experiences, especially if they were not considering any type of medical transition. However, some people voiced the opinion that as trans identities are more widely known, using trans terminology can sometimes be a "foot in the door" for non-binary people.



The consensus from the group was that it is up to everyone to decide for themselves what label or identity, if any, is suitable for them and that no one should invalidate other people's experiences. There are also very welcoming spaces that may seem binary at first glance, but are not, like Trans Masculine Scotland. **It is important for organisations to be clear that they are supportive of diverse identities.**



INTERSECTING IDENTITIES

"I thought I would have to hide my queer identity throughout my life."

- Red, Down with the Sickness

Red crosses several different boundaries and complex identities, including bisexual, genderqueer nonbinary, neurodivergent and disabled. They write about their experiences and disability activism on righdownwiththesickness.wordpress.com and run the Facebook page, "The Disabled Eco-Enby". Through their discussion, they shared how their intersecting identities can be complicated in the queer community and how they sometimes feel unwelcome in LGBTQ+ spaces.

Red was always gender non-conforming, but they did not learn about the term "non-binary" until their late twenties as non-binary is one of the least widely known aspects of the rainbow. They also spoke of the difficulty identifying as bisexual both during the 1990s when bisexuality was not widely known or understood and under Section 28 (a law that banned local authorities, including schools and public libraries, from discussing or sharing material about homosexuality (1988-2000 in Scotland and 1988-2003 in England and Wales)). Red's journey to understanding their different identities was further complicated when being gender non-conforming and their bi-identity was often put down to neurodivergence.

Q: (Jules) What do you feel when you see "LGBT+" written down?

A: (Red) I have some relief when I see the "+". If there is no "+", I may have to do a lot of explaining and I may not be welcome.

(Jules) We are communicating the opposite as an organisation. We are trying to share that we are welcoming.

(Red) I felt that I could not access the [LGBT Health and Wellbeing] services because I am non-binary, bi and married to a man. I only thought to reach out when I was looking for mental health services beyond the NHS.

(Jules) This is why language is so important in a queer space because the feeling that you are getting is the opposite of what we are intending.

(Red) I don't feel unwelcome anymore. When I looked in the [programme] booklet and saw which spaces were marked as accessible, it made me feel like I might be welcome.

Q: (Community member) Is there any label in particular that you don't like being mentioned? I don't mind being trans, woman, veteran or demipan, but disabled, why should it be part of the + in the LGBTQ+ community? Do any of the speakers feel there's been a label before the person?

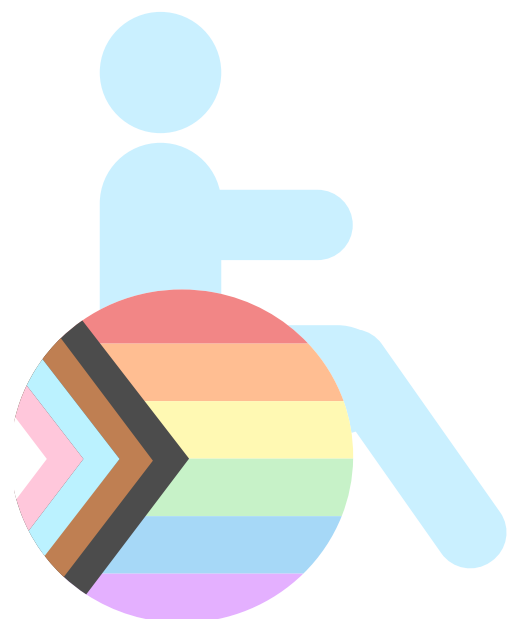
A: (Red) I like it. Being disabled is not about a failure of mine, but society to not accommodate me. I find it empowering to say that I am disabled and that there are accommodations that I need to access queer spaces.

A: (Community member) It is not about being disabled as part of the LGBTQ+ community, but accounting for people with disabilities.



ABLEISM AND INTERSECTIONALITY

Red and members of the community shared that a major issue within the LGBTQ+ community and LGBTQ+ spaces is ableism. It is possible that this is due to the oppression that LGBTQ+ people feel themselves which may cause them to ignore the oppression of others. Red noted that, in her experience, some people think that they cannot be ableist because they are part of the LGBTQ+ community. We need to consider intersectionality in everything. The labelling of disabled people is part of the LGBTQ+ community because it is part of society. Red also shared that seeing the way accessible spaces were marked in the LGBT Health and Wellbeing programme made them feel more welcome and able to attend events.

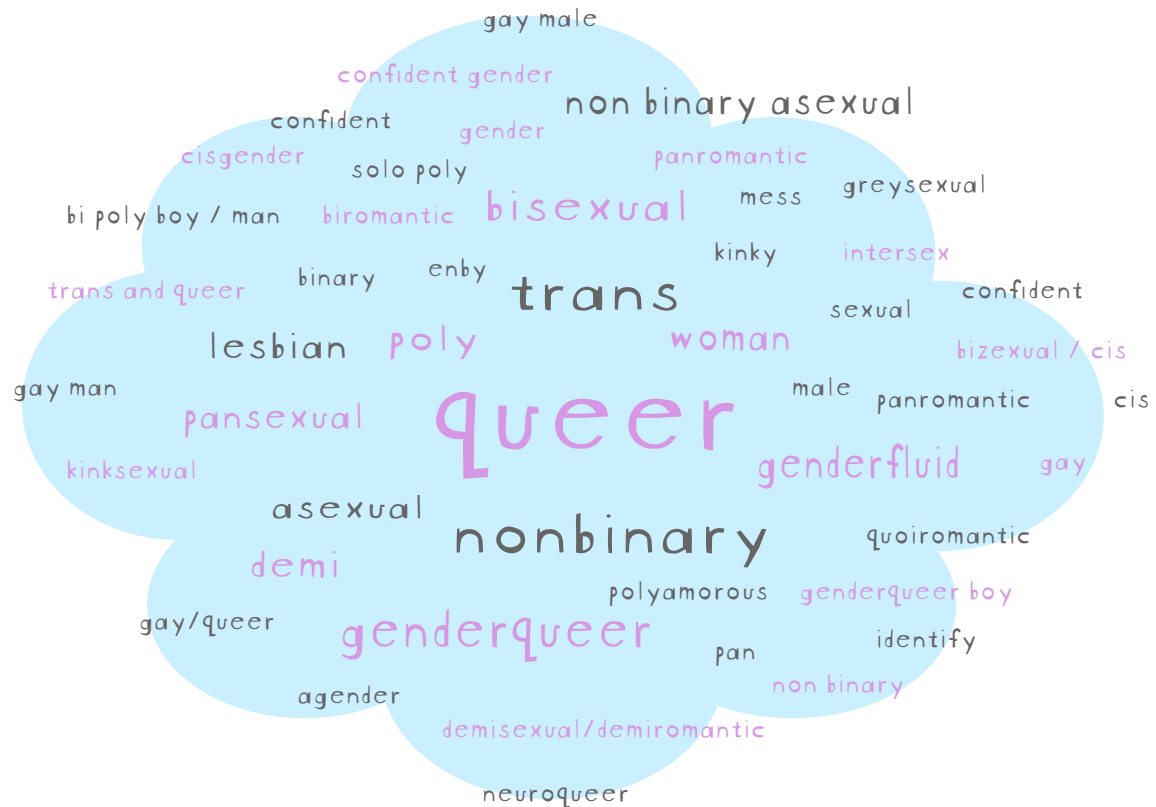


TERMINOLOGY

"How you label yourself is at odds sometimes with the rest of the world."

- Jules, LGBT Health and Wellbeing

Following the panel discussion, the group was asked to add their identifying words to a word cloud using Sli.do. This was an opportunity for the group to examine their use of LGBTQ+ terminology and to learn new terms from each other. Two terms that seemed to be largely unknown to the group were "graysexual" and "Enby".



Graysexual

Somewhere between asexual and sexual. This can include, but is not limited to, someone who only experiences sexual attraction in very particular situations, experiences sexual attraction but has a low sex drive, or experiences some sexual attraction and drive but not enough to act on it.



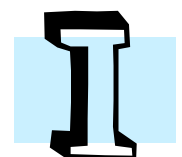
Enby

Shorthand for Non-Binary, often used online. This term sparked some debate. While some people found it to be a good alternative to binary terms like "boy" and "girl", others felt that the term was very infantile. This was a reminder of the importance of respecting how other people identify themselves, even if you do not agree with the term that they choose for themselves.



Intersex

One identity that many attendees felt was underrepresented in the LGBTQ+ community was intersex. Intersex characteristics are hidden away and there is a lack of knowledge and a lack of intersex voices in these discussions. Despite being underrepresented, intersex is an important identity in itself and intersex people can help change perceptions on binary sex and gender by showing that sex is not binary.



CONCLUSION

As the first community discussion hosted online by LGBT Health and Wellbeing, it was a unique experience. Most attendees felt that the event was intimate and educational. The online format also meant that people were able to attend regardless of their physical location and whilst the majority in attendance were from Edinburgh and surrounding areas, one attendee (originally from Scotland) joined the discussion from America. Most importantly, it provided a sense of community during a time when many people felt isolated.

I think it's hard to prescribe labels to others. We all identify ourselves and only you can do so, even if you're observed as "fitting" that certain label.

I think it's nice to be in a safe place.

We can all feel not included for any reason as an older gay man who usually gets on better with people younger than me, it can be hard to "fit in". In my experience, a lot of the community can be ageist and exclusive ... so you end up lonely. It is good to have things like this.

We're all human beings and need love.

My cousin and I chatted for ages about labels, he advocated for people against any beyond 'human', and I embrace a lot of labels. For me labels can be empowering.

Above are some comments from the Zoom chat box. Attendees could interact with each other throughout the event using the chat and share their opinions if they did not get a chance to speak or ask questions during the discussion.

Event feedback

"Really enjoyed the event, and the participatory elements. As a shy person, I appreciated not feeling pressured to contribute, and felt that was really well and sensitively accommodated. The technical elements were well explained and quite seamless, and a nice addition. The hosting in general was excellent! Thank you so much for such a warm and inclusive event. Really helpful in these weird times."

Event feedback

"I liked hearing people with lots of different perspectives talk about their side of things while still respecting each other"

Event feedback

"This was my first of these events and I really enjoyed it! I loved how it was a safe space for anybody and that people felt so secure to be able to share their experiences freely within the group. I was made aware of things other people experience that I never would have been aware of in my own bubble. I think the zoom call seemed to really work well, and wonder if even once we can socialise in person again zoom calls could be used for those who cannot access events in person due to disability or mental health issues etc. Thanks again for a great meeting!"

RESOURCES

Aven - The Asexual Visibility & Education Network

www.asexuality.org

Down with the Sickness

www.rightdownwiththesickness.wordpress.com

Intersex UK

www.facebook.com/intersexuk

LGBT Health and Wellbeing

www.lgbthealth.org.uk

Non-Binary Scotland

www.facebook.com/groups/nonbinaryscotland

Polyamory.Scot

www.polyamory.scot

Scottish Trans

www.scottishtrans.org

www.scottishtrans.org/link-categories/transgender-intersex/uk-intersex

The Disabled Eco-Enby

www.facebook.com/thedisabledcoenby

Trans Masculine Scotland

www.transmascot.wordpress.com

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