

# NOT ALONE:

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CRISIS RESPONSE GUIDE FOR LGBT  
COMMUNITY MEMBERS





# The Not Alone Initiative

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'Addressing mental health and psychosocial aspects of COVID-19 pandemic within the LGBT community in Uganda'

*"Healing takes time but asking for help is a Courageous step"*

I was on the verge of giving up on life because i thought no one understood me but when i talked to a Psychologist and opened up, my life stabalized. I am happy and helping people who have challenges with mental health.

**!!! COME OUT AND SPEAK ABOUT MENTAL HEALTH!!!"**

**Luswata Brant**

**ED Icebreakers Uganda**

***Crisis Response Guide***

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## ABOUT THE NOT ALONE INITIATIVE

The Not Alone Initiative is an initiative to change the culture of mental health and make it okay to speak about mental health and effects within the LGBT community in Uganda.

The Not Alone Initiative intends to build stronger support group therapy sessions for sharing and learning for LGBT persons experiencing mental health issues arising from to stigma, discrimination and violence faced within the LGBT community; and inmate partner violence and gender based violence from general community. This is in response to the challenges faced by the LGBT community exposed to toxic families and communities without much help during the covid-19 crisis. The Initiative aims at creating a safe space for LGBT persons where to express themselves freely about lived realities on mental health issues and create intervention measures for healing.

If you or someone is experiencing mental health issues (depression, stress, anxiety, mania, or any emotional challenges) suicidal attempts, our psychologists are available on a toll free line 0800-100-094 or reach out to our social media.

## Objectives of the Crisis Response Guide

**Develop resources to promote mental health awareness among the LGBTI community in Uganda**

**Create a welcoming, safe, nurturing, and accepting environment for LGBT members;**

**Provide valuable and accessible mental health services and resources to the LGBT community**

## BACKGROUND



On 11 March 2020, the World Health Organization classified COVID-19 as a pandemic.<sup>1</sup> Disease outbreak. This pandemic has affected the entire global population- by triggering worry, anxiety and fear of the uncertain. People with suppressed immunity such as those living with HIV and other chronic illness, are particularly vulnerable to COVID-19 pandemic and its numerous impacts.

There has been widespread panic about the pandemic with its impacts felt in many aspects by various groups of people. The LGBT and sex worker's community have been greatly affected by the impact of the pandemic being the vulnerable group they are from already underlying challenges such as homophobia and transphobia, punitive laws, issues of access to health care services, discrimination and stigmatization, among other challenges. These have further been exacerbated by the Presidential Directives and the Ministry of Health Directives guidelines on prevention of Covid-19. The lockdown has greatly affected many people's daily activities, routines and livelihoods. The impact was greatly felt by the LGBT community in the form of social isolation, loss of livelihood, lack of access to health facilities, lack of food relief services, forceful outing, being locked up in toxic environment and with toxic persons, among other challenges during the lock down.

All these have impacted negatively on the LGBTI protection, Physical health and psychological wellbeing and as a result, levels of loneliness, depression, harmful use of alcohol and drugs, gender based violence, self-harm or suicidal tendencies have shoot up including feelings of hopelessness and helplessness.

With the funding from **UHAI EASHRI**, Ice Breakers Uganda has been implementing MHPSS services to LGBT community since March 2020. This is aimed at providing psychosocial support services to the members to improve their psychological well-being. These services have been provided through different modes which includes; individual counseling, group therapy, family therapy both online and phone calls, online sensitizations and Ask the Dr. Live Shows.

IBU has a number of mental health workers (clinical psychologists, counselors) and peers who have been instrumental, worked tirelessly and supported in implementation process of the services during Covid-19 pandemic lock down, which process continued after the lock down.





## INTRODUCTION

Mental health and psychosocial support services have played a very important role during the pandemic. There has been an increase in mental health problems during this period amongst the marginalized groups which exacerbated the pre-existing mental health disorders. These calls for not only demands for psychosocial service support systems but further to regularize the discussion on mental health awareness and find intervention measures to address the emerging issues. It should be noted that the LGBT community and prone and susceptible mental health issues from the underlying factors like discrimination, stigmatization, family background and other factors that create vulnerabilities among the LGBT community, incur mental health challenges. The need for mental health services is therefore inevitable.

Despite the importance of mental health in Uganda, no wholistic mental health interventions for sexual and gender diverse populations have been tried, tested and published with the aim of ensuring healthy lives and promoting wellbeing further pandemic situations.

Whist mental health is an important component in people's lives, no particular attention is being paid to it and largely it does not form part of the major programming for human rights organizations. Mental health challenges are therefore left to be dealt with at personal level rather than at organizational personal level. Without mental wellbeing, we cannot be health. We all experience emotional ups and downs from time to time, caused by events in our lives .

The covid-19 pandemic has further impacted negatively in the lives of the LGBT community members, with effects like suicide, insomnia, alcoholism, anger outbursts among other effects. These effects may result into long standing psychological and emotional problems such as self-harm, depression, trauma among other health concerns. The Not Alone Initiative to build and sustain interventions for the LGBT community beyond the covid-19 pandemic where the community members are able to be linked with counsellors, psychologists and peers to create a long lasting solution on mental health and wellbeing.

## WHAT IS MENTAL HEALTH?



Mental health is defined as a state of well-being in which every individual realizes his or her own potential, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to her or his community .

Mental health can be described according to;

- a) How one feels about himself/herself and others,
- b) How one responds to the day to day demands of life, how one thinks, feels, and acts in the face of daily life problems, how one handles stress, relates with others and makes choices that make the individual enjoy life.

By the above definition, mental health is the foundation for wellbeing and effective functioning for individuals and communities.

Mental health involves effective functioning in daily activities, resulting in productive activities (work, school, care giving) healthy relationship and the ability to adapt to change and cope with adversity. It refers to our emotions, our thoughts, and feelings, our ability to solve problems and overcome difficulties, our social connections and our understanding of our environment/world around us.



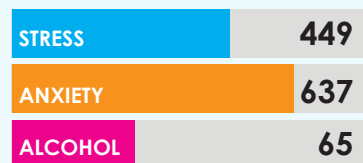


## Lived realities of mental health challenges during Covid-19

Since March 2020, 1919 clients have sought for Mental Health and Psychosocial Support Services (MHPSS) from IBU. On assessment, common symptoms presented were indicative of depression (768), stress related problems (449), anxiety (637) and addiction to alcohol (65). Out of the 768 clients who presented with symptoms of depression, 48 suicide attempts and there were supported with MHPSS services hence stopping them from completing the mission.



**DEPRESSION  
(768)**

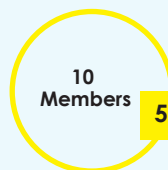


Further, seven (7) peer support WhatsApp groups were created and each group contained not more than 15 LGBT individuals, 5 therapy groups of not more than 10 members and 267 LGBT members reached out on the toll free line.



15 LGBT  
Individuals

**7 Peer Support  
WhatsApp groups**



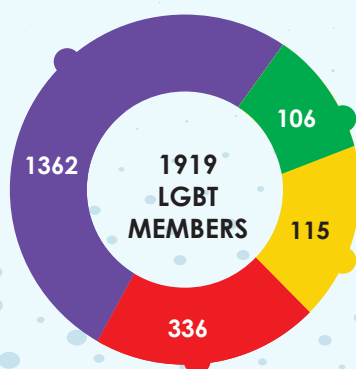
10  
Members

**5 Therapy Groups**



**267 LGBT  
Individuals**

Among the 1919 LGBT members reached with MHPSS services, 106 were lesbian, 1,362 were gay, 115 were bisexual (97 bisexual men and 18 bisexual women) and 336 were transgender people (21 men and 315 women)



Interventions were created through online and offline individual and therapy groups in the following districts; Kampala, Wakiso, Mukono, Jinja, Mbale, Hoima, Mbarara, Bushenyi and Ishaka district.

## Common mental health challenges manifestations in the LGBT community during covid-19 pandemic crisis

### Anxiety

Anxiety is a warning signal from the body that there is danger brewing. Sometimes anxiety is driven by subjective experiences, i.e., personal histories, such as trauma, injuries, or phobias. Subjective experiences are frequently the storehouses of forceful emotions that have the power to distort reality. Even a threat that is imagined can fill you with dread and leave you catastrophizing.

### How anxiety manifests

By objective experiences, meaning that it springs from a very real hazard in your environment, like the, fear of an imminent danger, threat real or otherwise, coronavirus.

The most crushing anxiety occurs when subjective and objective experiences collide. For example, if you have a history of respiratory problems, such as asthma, fear of harm, a high-risk category.

If someone you love has died, the loss could push your anxiety to levels that feel beyond your control.

### Depression

Depression is a mood disorder that descends seemingly out of the blue, or it may come on the heels of a defeat or personal loss, producing persistent feelings of sadness, worthlessness, hopelessness, pessimism, or guilt. Depression also interferes with concentration, motivation, and other aspects of everyday functioning.

Depression often involves persistent sad, anxious, or empty mood; feelings of hopelessness or pessimism; and feelings of guilt, worthlessness, or helplessness. It can also involve loss of interest or pleasure in hobbies and activities that were once enjoyed, including sex. Decreased energy, fatigue, or a sense of being "slowed down" are also common, as are restlessness, irritability, and difficulty concentrating, remembering, or making decisions. Many with depression have thoughts of death or suicide.

## How depression manifests

- Feeling exhausted/fatigue
- Moody and or mood swings
- Absentmindedness
- Insomnia or uncomfortable sleep, with night mares
- Dissatisfied with life, whatever you are and feeling angry
- Feel of worthlessness
- You can't think straight, always doubtful of your decisions and can't stand by a decision you make
- Want to be yourself in your own world, but you don't really want to be alone
- Want to go out to happy hour, but you are worn-out
- Want to cry, but really have no reason to cry
- You mask your pain in smiles, but inside you are hurting
- You want to do something meaningful or productive, but you feel anxious and overly tired
- You feel sad, that you feel sad
- You feel like not talking to anybody, but at the same time you feel you miss some people and want to talk
- You get lost in your thoughts, you wonder what's wrong
- You might be having everything you need, but you are still not happy, and you wonder what is wrong
- Feeling low self-esteem, shy and timid
- Sweaty palms

## Stress

Stress generally refers the psychological perception of pressure and the body's response to it. It involves multiple systems, from metabolism to muscles to memory.

Some stress is necessary for all living systems; it is the means by which they encounter and respond to the challenges and uncertainties of existence. The perception of danger sets off an automatic response system, known as the fight-or-flight response, that, activated through hormonal signals, prepares to meet a threat or to flee from it. Stress triggers a cascade of hormones, including adrenaline and cortisol, that surge through the body.

These hormones increase heartbeat and the circulation of blood to support quick action, mobilize fat and sugar for immediate energy, focus attention to track the danger, prepare muscles for movement, and more.

But this lifesaving response was meant to solve short-term, life-threatening problems, not extended difficulties such as long term transition, or relationship problems.

## How stress manifests

Stress manifests in the following forms;

- Prolonged or repeated arousal of the stress response can have harmful physical and psychological consequences such as ailments from heart disease and diabetes to anxiety and depression.
- Anger outburst, irritation
- Hallucinations; perception of things not real
- Fear
- Faster heartbeat and muscle tension
- Gastrointestinal issues
- Faster heartbeat and muscle tension
- Gastrointestinal issues
- Heavier and faster breathing which can strain the lungs and blunt the immune system's ability to respond to threats.

## Mania

Mania is a state of elevated energy, mood, and behavior, most often seen in those with bipolar disorder, schizoaffective disorder, or who have taken certain drugs or medications.

Mania can range from mild to severe; at its most extreme, mania can trigger delusions, violence, and an increased risk of suicide.

## How mania manifests

- Depending on the cause, a manic episode can last anywhere from several days to several months, and will typically increase in severity and in the level of agitation as it progresses. Milder mania is more likely to be associated with positive outcomes, like increased productivity or greater feelings of optimism.

- Emotional outburst such as irritation or anxiety.
- Positive energy and euphoric behaviour (feeling intense excitement and happiness).

## **Impact of mental health on the LGBT Community during Covid-19 crisis**

The pandemic has negatively impacted on the lives on LGBTI persons that, it's common for individuals to feel stressed and worried. However, the common impacts on LGBT community (both directly and indirectly) included;

- Fear of falling ill and dying due to the increasing Covid-19 cases within the country.
- Avoiding approaching health facilities due to stigma and fear of becoming infected while in care.
- Fear of losing livelihoods, not being able to work during the lock down. Whereby even after the lock down some LGBT community members lost their jobs hence increased worries of where they are going to livelihoods.
- Due to stay-at-home restrictions, many LGBT youth were confined in hostile environments with unsupportive family members or people who share home, increasing their exposure to violence and leading them feel anxious and depressed.
- Walking long distance to access health services during the lockdown, it affected the treatment plan of LGBT people especially those who are leaving with HIV as well as mental health. For example, one of our psychologist, she had to call to Butabika Hospital a referral hospital for mental health to access some drugs for her client who had taken one month without taking his drugs.
- Fear of being socially excluded/placed in quarantine and in the community (e.g. Homophobia)
- Feeling powerless in protecting loved ones and fear of losing loved ones because of the virus especially those who have be supportive of their sexuality like mothers, sisters and partners.
- Feelings of helplessness, boredom, loneliness and depression due to being isolated.

- Covid-19 pandemic also increased the rate of intimate partner violence among the LGBT community where people were abused by their partners emotionally and physically due to the fact that they did not have anywhere to run to and also they were dependent on them.
- Fear of going back to their families who have rejected them. In a situation of lack of employment, income, or savings may mean moving back with parents, family, or friends who are LGBT phobic or otherwise unaccepting of their identity. This is particularly true for younger LGBT people. Physical distancing may have additional unintended negative consequences related to being confined to an environment that may be unsupportive or abusive.
- Possible anger and aggression against government and frontline workers
- Possible mistrust of information provided by government and other authorities  
People with developing or existing mental health and substance use disorders experiencing relapses and other negative outcomes because they are avoiding health facilities or unable to access their care provider
- Pandemic strategies such as social isolation have had a greater impact on the LGBT people such as loss of physical social network on LGBT people due to their circumstances, experience or conditions. LGBT people being an interdependent community, there has been reduced all aspect support (legal, medical, economical, psychological etc.) for the people; especially those that are homeless and those in unsafe family environments. For example, in March 20 LGBT people were arrested at a shelter by police and accused of violating social distancing requirements.
- Struggle about the future. The future is less certain and more distant. Anxiety related symptoms like panic, excessive worrying, feeling agitated, restlessness, fatigue, difficulty concentrating, irritable, tense, problems with sleeping, irrational fear, among others, for future expectations, future relations, and the path to their future goals and aspirations escalate day by day.
- LGBT people are more likely to be unemployed and to live in poverty than the general population. Many in the LGBT community work in the informal sector and lack access to paid sick leave, unemployment compensation, and coverage.



## THE RIGHT TO MENTAL HEALTH



The right to health is provided in Constitution of the Republic of Uganda under the National Objectives and Directive Principles of State Policy. The Objective XXIV provides to the States to fulfill the fundamental rights of all Ugandans to access to health services.

The position is further reiterated under Objective XX that the State shall take all practical measures to ensure the provision of basic medical services to the population.

The Mental Health Act 2018 provides for the promotion and protection of the rights of persons with mental illness, commission research into emerging issues on mental illness.

The Ministry of Health mental health policy position on care and treatment ring-fences the general position of the Public Health Act Cap 281, to consolidate the law regulating the preservation of the public health. The policy position puts in place the Butakika hospital for care and treatment of persons who are experiencing mental health challenges.

The legal and policy position therefore gives Ice Breakers Uganda to provide a range of support to LGBT community during and after this pandemic. Ice Breakers Uganda was able to ensure that we are able to maintain all of our services. We further offered an array of options for LGBT community members.



## Social Position on Mental Health Challenges by LGBT Community

Stress is a lived experience associated to many of the LGBT community members. It has since been quite normal to be feeling this way in the current situation. Workers may feel that they are not doing a good enough job, that there is a high demand on them, and additional new pressures including following strict Ministry of Health guidelines and Presidential directives.

Stress and the feelings associated with it are by no means a reflection that you cannot do your job or that you are weak, even if you feel that way. In fact, stress can be useful. Right now, the feeling of stress may be keeping you going at your job and providing a sense of purpose. Managing your stress and psychosocial wellbeing during this time is as important as managing your physical health.

Take care of your basic needs and employ helpful coping strategies, ensure enough rest and respite during work, eat sufficient and healthy food, engage in physical activity, and stay in contact with family and friends. Avoid using unhelpful coping strategies such as tobacco, alcohol or other drugs. In the long term, these can worsen your mental and physical wellbeing.

Some workers may unfortunately experience ostracization by their family or community due to stigma. This can make an already challenging situation far more difficult. If possible, staying connected with your loved ones through digital methods is one way to maintain contact. Turn to your colleagues, your manager or other trusted persons for social support- your colleagues may be having similar experiences to you.

This is likely a unique and unprecedented scenario for many workers, particularly if they have not been involved in similar responses. Even so, using the strategies that you have used in the past to manage times of stress can benefit you now. The strategies to benefit feelings of stress are the same, even if the scenario is different.

If your stress worsens and you feel overwhelmed, you are not to blame. Everyone experiences stress and copes with it differently. Ongoing and old pressures from your personal life can affect your mental wellbeing in your day to day job. You may notice changes in how you are working, your mood may change such as increased irritability, feeling low or more anxious, you may feel chronically exhausted or it may feel harder to relax during respite periods, or you may have unexplained physical complaints such as body pain or stomach aches.

Chronic stress can affect your mental wellbeing and your work and can affect you even after the situation improves. If the stress becomes overwhelming, please approach your lead or the appropriate person to ensure you are provided with appropriate support.

## **Bottlenecks in Implementing MHPSS within the LGBT Community during the Pandemic**

The highest number of LGBT community members presented symptoms indicative of acute stress, anxiety and depression disorders where some missed their anti-depressants drugs for a month due to the effects of the lockdown

Many LGBT people are not adhering well to their appointments and exercises given. However, the mental health counsellors have been managing this by reminding them through a phone call.

LGBT People demand for instant solution, not knowing that counselling is a process.

Exhaustive long off hour communication with client due to the medium of communication that entails calling, reading, typing, analyzing, and interpretation

Inability to observe the non-verbal cues of client due to the non-physical medium of communication

LGBT individuals keep their sexuality hidden hence increasing their risk of psychological distress. This also has prevented them from accessing group-based coping resources that buffer against the negative effects of stigma.

## **Protection/coping mechanisms for LGBT community during Covid-19 crisis**

As physical distancing orders can increase isolation for many, LGBT community members may benefit from seeking supports and using the following strategies to improve mental health;

Stay connected to supportive people; Schedule video chats with friends you cannot see in person to increase positive social interactions on a regular basis.

Connect to LGBT online spaces and media if you are feeling isolated; Check out LGBT-specific content online, discussion groups, books, movies, and/or TV shows.

Staying connected to supportive content and online spaces can help remind you that you are not alone; Try to video chat with friends you cannot see in person to increase positive social interactions. Consider scheduling a weekly online “hangout” to catch up or share a fun activity.

Delay talking about difficult topics with your family right now. You may want to have these talks when people feel less stressed. Take breaks away from unsupportive people in the home.

Practice being kind to yourself. Recognize your strengths and turn down the negative self-talk.

Try to focus on the things you can control or influence. For example, choose to stick to a sleep routine, do something kind for another, practice a hobby.

Support and express your identity. Catch up on LGBT books, TV shows, and movies. Find an online blog or group that supports your identity. Paint, draw, and write about LGBT-related themes. Explore other ways of expressing your identity.

Maintain healthy habits. Move your body, get fresh air, get plenty of sleep, and keep a regular meal schedule. Routines reduce anxiety and stress. Keep it simple and stick to it.

Reduce screen time in the evenings to reduce stress and improve sleep. Try to schedule pleasant activities each evening that do not require a phone, tablet, or computer screen. Reducing screen time can also help reduce your exposure to anxiety-producing news.

Avoid engaging in online arguments with people who make anti-LGBT statements. Instead, find ways of using your voice that feel empowering and productive.

Practice safe sex with consideration of physical distancing recommendations. Your safest sex partner right now is yourself. Call your dropping center (DIC) or IBU clinic to arrange STI testing, HIV testing etc.

Take medications as prescribed. For example, PrEP and ART must be taken DAILY to be effective. Ask your doctor/clinic for refills when you need them. Talk to your doctor/clinic about Telehealth (video) appointments. More information about Telehealth please reach out to us on 0800-100-094 or our social media platforms

Ask your doctor about safe binding practices if you are ill. It is important to listen to your body, especially if you have respiratory symptoms such as a cough or shortness of breath.

Try to avoid verbal confrontations. Even if they come at you with homophobic quips don't respond as this may turn into a worse situation. Breathe & count to 10 before you respond, this will allow you to organize your mind before you blurt out something you might regret.

Be helpful around the house. That way they will see that although you are an LGBT person, you are resourceful and can be relied on.

Be kind to your parents and siblings during the COVID-19 crisis or any other crisis. This way you will have people to defend you when they see another family member being homophobic towards you.

Make sure you have a password on your phone & follow digital security measures for example log out of any laptop used, delete messages from your partner, log out of your social media accounts. This helps keep the communication between you and other LGBT community members secure.

Try and blend in the way you carry yourself so as not to raise suspicion. Although out here we affirm you as a transgender man or woman please try and "behave accordingly" during the lock down and the crisis. We need you alive and safe.

Keep your mind occupied to blot out the negativity. Read books, magazines and articles. Listen to podcasts, watch films and do puzzles anything to keep you away from over thinking.

Follow the health tips from the Ministry of Health. Wash or sanitize regularly, do not touch MEN (mouth, eyes and nose) and practice social distancing.



## **Mental health support innovations created during Covid-19 pandemic crisis**

The pandemic has generated support circles for human rights defenders and the peer community. These mental innovations are;

### **a) Peer support regeneration and resilience circles**

It is inevitable that society will change after this pandemic. But whose ideas will drive those changes? As “normal” life and “business as usual” have ground to a halt, we have a rare opening to build momentum to create the inclusive, joyful, liberated world we need. It will be peers to create the picture of a new normal that will allow us to wake up to a better version of ourselves and our communities, where justice and compassion are a reality, value each other and build a social safety net that holds us all, and where we live in regenerative relationships with each other and with the Earth. To help us get there, we offer critical moments to move us toward the post-pandemic future we need. We have built these from a rich field of narrative research and in consultation with narrative experts. We share the kind of stories needed to illustrate each narrative, and sample projects and slogans to inspire your thinking. We understand that stories look different across peer mediums and cultural traditions, in different communities, depending on the communities designed to reach. You know your creative practice and peer communities best. We invite you to adapt these ideas according to the strengths and opportunities of your own communities and peers.

### **b) Online coaching and sporting activities**

The pandemic introduced online classes to coach front line defenders/responders to be able to respond to the community needs. This is in line with the Ministry of Health guidelines and Presidential directives on prevention of the Covid-19 pandemic. The coaching enabled to reach multiple responders with the real time challenges and it prescribes real time solutions to the issues identified even with the challenges of Covid-19 pandemic. It is further to note that sporting and co-curriculum activities are a method of building regeneration and resilience. The online sporting activities encourages community members to practice safe sporting activities while observing the Presidential and the Ministry of Health directives.



## CONCLUSION



This guide brings together a wide range of academic literature to consider how the current global pandemic may impact LGBT people. In particular, it focuses on social interactions resulting from physical distancing, social isolation, increases in economic strain, and struggles with worries about the present and future. The Not Alone Initiative is committed towards ensuring that LGBT people are supported throughout this pandemic by providing MHPSS services access to an affirming community for LGBT people and trained crisis counselors to respond and intervene to crisis within the LGBT community. We hope others will join us in helping LGBT people know that they are not alone and provide the social, economic, and mental health support much needed during these unprecedented times.



## RECOMMENDATIONS

### To the Development Partners

Continue providing equitable care to the LGBT community, particularly those who might be vulnerable or at higher risk of poor outcomes like those living with HIV, those with mental illness, amongst all the other vulnerable.

Continue to support the LGBT organizing to be able to effectively address mental health challenges at organisational level, particularly. With programs that can effectively address mental health challenges.

### To human rights organisations/LGBT organisations

LGBT organizations and human rights organizations should urge with the government to recognize that LGBT people are among those particularly vulnerable in this crisis and take targeted steps to ensure that they are included and their voices heard when addressing the pandemic. Such measures include: to ensure that LGBT people are not subjected to discrimination or fear retribution for seeking healthcare and to address the socio-economic impacts of the pandemic should consider the particular vulnerabilities of the LGBT people.

Ensure access to information on specific needs based on the community feedback, including up to date information regarding where and how to access different treatments like ARVs, hormonal treatment for the Trans, among others.

Mobilize the LGBT communities to fight together as one, following the advice of the public health professionals. Encourage the communities to think about “they’re here and now”, not think about what it’s going to be like in six months or a year from now, because that can be overwhelming. Think about it day by day, and week by week.

Advocate for inclusion and non-discriminatory access of LGBT communities to mental health services. Include LGBT populations in mental health care work force recruiting and training initiatives focused on diversifying the workforce for efficient service delivery.

Address the potential negative social impact of physical distancing. Efforts must be made to ensure that LGBT people know that they are not alone and feel encouraged to seek support and social connections through means that do not rely

on physical proximity.

Advocate and reinforce capacities to different departments for emergency, psychological (mental health services) and social support, safety and security for those affected by the pandemic and are already feeling anxious, stigmatized, and vulnerable.

Design online and in-person surveys and other engagement activities so that the distant persons are able to access care and participate in community progress activities. Access to supportive individuals and online communities might help alleviate anxiety about the future and provide an outlet for identity support and expression of LGBT people.

Ensure active outreaches to give and collect feedback from persons in the LGBT communities. Include existing LGBT groups, communities and centers in engagement and outreaches as they have key roles in prevention and supporting access to medical care.

Understand particular needs, preferred communication channels, preferred languages, misinformation and questions. Tailor all activities to the context, adjusting for community perceptions, beliefs, and practices.

To LGBT community

There is a need for services that allow LGBT people to discuss their anxieties with individuals who can provide them with social support and assist them in exploring ways they may be able to access additional resources.

LGBT people who find themselves in an environment that does not affirm identity, or places them at risk of abuse and victimization should be encouraged to reach out to supportive individuals to help them maintain their own safety while also providing an outlet from them to be their authentic selves.



## ICEBREAKERS UGANDA'S ROLE

**The Not Alone Initiative** is uniquely positioned to provide a range of support to LGBT community during and after this pandemic. Ice Breakers Uganda was able to ensure that we are able to maintain all of our services. We further offered an array of options for LGBT community members ranging from our 12 weeks' therapy sessions, peer support sessions, WhatsApp support groups, one on one session both online and offline, to our community members with help of our trained crisis response team counselors, and our support resources for LGBT community members on topics relevant to them.

The LGBT community seeking support while physically distant from can join **The Not Alone space**, a safe space social networking for LGBT members. The Initiative provides LGBT members and allies with a safe, affirming community and the opportunity to connect with people who might be going through similar experiences. Finding a safe community online can be a powerful way to deal with physical isolation, seeking peer support, and explore their identity.

Not Alone Lifeline (0800 100 094), provide support to LGBT members in crisis. LGBT members who experience anxiety and concerns over their physical or mental health or their economic situation can find our clinical psychologist ready to listen and support them. Our research (Invisible Scars <https://voice.global/assets/2019/11/InvisibleScars.pdf>) shows, 21 LGBT members out of 184 had attempted suicide. During the lockdown IBU's crisis services reached over 48 LGBT people with suicide risk during their interaction with IBU mental health team were successfully de-escalated. Now more than ever, it's important to take action to support the mental health needs of LGBT people. Even when practicing physical distancing, LGBT people should know that they are not alone.

## Resources for LGBT Community During the Covid-19 Pandemic



Resources for coping with or combating the negative mental health effects of COVID-19 include:

### ONLINE CHAT/TEXT

Join on WhatsApp groups chats  
Online counseling sessions

### ONLINE SUPPORT AND MEDIA

Mental health guest speakers talk  
“Ask the Dr.” online support sessions  
Publication: <https://voice.global/assets/2019/11/InvisibleScars.pdf>

### CRISIS SUPPORT

Resources that may help if you are experiencing a mental health crisis or need immediate support include:

**The Not Alone Initiative** (phone/text/chat) –0800 100-094, or visit our social media platforms

Crisis Hotline (crisis counselors) - 0800-100-094, or visit our social media platforms

Suicide Prevention Lifeline (phone/chat) - 0800-100-094

**This report is a collaborative effort from the following individuals;**

Herbert Ayesiga, Programs Director, Icebreakers Uganda

### **IBU mental health department**

Mukyala Racheal, IBU clinical psychologist

Alice Nnonana, Psychologist

Derrick Ssekamate, Counselor

Nakimuli Majorie, Senior Counselor

### **Associate for Health Rights Uganda**

Fire that Fuels Project to mitigate human rights abuses during Covid-19 Pandemic using peer based mental health human centered design approach.

## REFERENCES

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# NOT ALONE:

CRISIS RESPONSE GUIDE FOR LGBT  
COMMUNITY MEMBERS

“The power is within us, having mental health issues hasn’t stopped me from being happy and caring my own weather. Remember you are **Not Alone**”

**Elvis Ayesiga Herbert**

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