



THRIVING AS A BISEXUAL OR QUEER WOMAN:

Tips on How to Flourish



Written by Mary Heath

Original research conducted by Mary Heath
(maryheath@flinders.edu.au) and
Ea Mulligan (ea.mulligan@flinders.edu.au)

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2 **Thriving as a bisexual or queer woman**

Tips on how to flourish

This document brings together stories from 20 Australian women who identify as bi or queer and who are leading thriving lives. They agreed to be interviewed and to share their wisdom about how to thrive as a queer or bi woman: sharing some of the ways they find fulfilment, support, joy and sustenance for themselves.

Every woman who spoke with us felt that friendship was her key source of support. **Friends, partners, and** (for some), **family** were sources of love, acceptance, celebration, affirmation, respect and encouragement through hard times and great times.

Being part of **organisations and groups** was a strategy many women recommended. Participation in groups allowed women to experience connection, build friendships and access community. Organisations were places to socialise, find support and acceptance, have fun, share stories, give something back to others and (sometimes) to flirt or find partners. Finding the right group for you was an important first step.

Involvement in **community** also came highly recommended. Community gave many women a sense of being part of something bigger than themselves. Events and venues were safe and exciting places for many women who spoke with us. However, being a part of a community went further, allowing a sense of strength in numbers and of pride. Community was a place where you could relax among peers and learn from people with a diversity of experiences that had something in common with your own.

Having a solid community of peers behind them was part of what allowed some women to **come out**. Being able to be open and honest about their choices and their identities was essential to wellbeing for many women who spoke with us. Although they stressed that each person must make their own decisions about how to come out, many women said that it took less energy to be out than staying in the closet, and it was a source of confidence and pride in their lives.

Personal strength and being true to yourself were recommended by many of the bisexual and queer women, which was one of the reasons they recommended coming out. Many of the bisexual women saw honesty as a key value in their lives. Women described self esteem and self acceptance as central to their capacity to thrive. They explained the decisions they had made and the work they had done to be able to accept themselves and then to choose lives in which they figured out what they deserved and what they were passionate about and went about organising those things in their lives.

Passionate and creative activities and taking constructive risks were central to the lives of the queer and bi women who told us their stories. Although the activities they had chosen were all different, each woman described figuring out what you are passionate about and being prepared to pursue it as a key element in a zestful life.

Spirituality was another ingredient of the good life for most of these women, though a few of them described their non-spiritual commitment to an ethical and generous life as more than sufficient. Those who saw spirituality as crucial in their lives described it as involving a sense of connection to something bigger than they were, a sense of awe, mystery or ethical awareness. Spirituality also provided some women with practices which gave them feelings of calm, wellbeing and affirmation. It represented a source of sustaining connection to something beyond the self.

Finally, we asked women about the role of **health care practitioners** in their wellbeing. It seemed clear that health care services were not the most important sources of thriving in their lives, but some women had experiences of health care which had been very significant to them. Women also provided detailed information about how they choose health care providers and what information they provide to their practitioners in order to obtain good care.

The women who spoke to us about how they flourish as bisexual and queer women were keen to share what they have learned with others and assist other women to thrive. We hope you will enjoy their stories and draw strength and inspiration from their successes.*

* All the names in this document are pseudonyms

'Just loving people': Friends, Partners and Family

Most bisexual and queer women said that their friends were their key source of support. Some also mentioned their partner/s. But friends were described as the absolutely critical element of support and affirmation for most of the bisexual and queer women we spoke to. One woman said that although her partners had been sources of support, friends were even more important:

I think friendships are the constant, are the kind of long-term things. I'm really blessed ... there's two in particular ... who are ... just fantastic, and I can be cheered up just by remembering that they're on the same planet... [Kate, bisexual]

Many of the bisexual and queer women mentioned the diverse sexualities or open mindedness of their friends as significant to them. Two bisexual women told us that gay men were their key friends:

I get most of my support from gay men... they're the most accepting. ... they don't care what side of the bread I decide to butter it on, it's fine with them. ... because I feel like I've been from one end of the sexual spectrum to the other—from being heterosexual; married;... a wannabe separatist; bisexual woman; mother; woman with a gay male partner—and I feel all of that is okay with these [gay] guys. [Leanne, bisexual]

Another bisexual woman spoke of a long term lesbian friend who had stood beside her through times in which her bisexual identity had been a source of conflict with other lesbians.

There was one lesbian woman in particular who never ceased to defend me ... and was always rock solid in supporting me ... no matter what my life choices were. She has never wavered in letting me know that she clearly supports whatever choices I make to thrive in my life. [Rebecca, bisexual]

Some women stressed that their friendships were a source of enjoyment. They had chosen to socialise with outgoing queer people who shared their interests (dance parties, for example). However, almost all of the queer and bisexual women (including some of those who specifically mentioned their dear gay, bisexual, lesbian and queer friends) had found supportive, joyful and enriching connections among a range of different people:

Tips on how to flourish

having friendships with a range of ages and a range of genders is important. ... there's something about that sort of balance that I wouldn't ever be willing to give up. [Kate, bisexual]

A lot of our friends identify as queer and lesbian or gay or ... (laughs) non-everything... gender-queer.... mixing with people of different beliefs and different experiences who all still accept and... validate my experience ... That's probably the most important thing. [Erin, queer]

Several women specifically valued feminist friends for the support and understanding they had provided:

[My] feminist friends ... regardless of their sexuality, had the kind of belief in ... having a healthy sexuality and having healthy relationships with whoever you go out with, so that was good. [Maya, bisexual]

All of the queer and bisexual women we interviewed had chosen friends who were accepting of their sexuality, and an accepting attitude was usually one of their criteria for a friend.

there's no having to justify who I am or why I do things the way I do, I'm accepted as a person ... I can talk about whatever I need to talk about ... without having to deal with my situation in the context of being queer or being in a transgendered relationship or being bisexual or any of that stuff. [Lena, bisexual]

Alana felt that a neutral attitude was sufficient: 'ignoring my sexuality is pretty useful... If [people I meet out at bands] were bothered by it I probably just wouldn't go. But nobody bats an eyelid in the places I go.'

Many had made concrete decisions to choose and nurture friendships which contributed to their wellbeing.

I've set myself up to have bi-friendly friends ... who are supportive and loving. ... part of that was just me being out and assertive about what I would and wouldn't put up with and networking around and finding cool people who are like me and who don't see me as a freak—may even consider me quite normal in comparison! (laughter) [Lena, bisexual]

I have had friends that have been a little bit biphobic. ... a lot of people think in terms of 'gay' or 'straight', one or the other... if I had any friends that... weren't able to come around on that I'm not sure if they'd still be my friends. (laughs) [Maya, bisexual]

One woman described the depth of her key friendships as growing from love that endured through shared experiences of good times and very hard times:

I think the bottom line [about my friends and partner] is they're all very good listeners, they're all very non-judgmental (laughs) and they've all had experience of seeing me in times of vulnerability and fragility ... they've actually been there when I've behaved in ways that I'm not proud of or pleased about and continue to love me. And it's been very mutual...
[Kate, bisexual]

Eva described the depth of her relationships, and how she goes about making and sustaining them. She had chosen people to create a sense of family with:

[My main source of support is] ... my chosen family. Since I was twenty I started out to virtually create that for myself... nowadays, when I see someone attractive, I say, 'I want to be friends with you,' and then I go and get them.

Women described their friendships as key resources in a range of ways. A circle of friends provided the social support to deal with feelings of isolation or loneliness, and times of hardship: 'if I'm ever feeling down I just have to pick up the phone, send a text, an e-mail, and I have people there.'
[Gemma, bisexual]

Being reminded that I'm loved and that people value me for what I do ... makes it easy to go on because I know that I'm not out there in the wilderness pushing for something by myself without other people being behind me.
[Lena, bisexual]

My family and friends helped keep me alive and functioning and out of harm's way during several 'fragmentations of the soul'... what traditionally might have been called a 'nervous breakdown'.
[Rebecca, bisexual]

However, friendship went beyond support in times when things were really tough. It also created the conditions for women to fully thrive:

[with my partner and closest friends I receive] the wholehearted respect of, and affirmation of, whatever I'm feeling and whatever I'm going through, and being really solidly listened to and heard, understood, supported, encouraged, affirmed. [Amy, bisexual]

Some forms of support were especially valuable to achieving thriving for women as bisexual or queer:

[my friends] express support for my journey and they don't discount my sexuality and my relationships with women as being less legitimate than heterosexual relationships... They have an understanding and are aware of some of the issues that I face because of my sexuality... [Erin, queer]

Partners

Many women spoke of their friends and their partner/s in the same breath as people who contributed to their sense of joy and thriving in the world. One woman summed up the capacities of a partner who helped her thrive like this:

It's knowing where you're coming from, being able to feed it back to you, being able to make you laugh, being able to put it into context, being able to understand where you're coming from, being able to share our ... professional ... lives, and sharing friends

[Zoe, bisexual]

The women we spoke with also found their partners strong sources of support for them as bisexual women:

the current relationship that I'm in is really supportive and my partner knows who I am and celebrates ... the fact that I'm bi rather than just accepting or tolerating. [Ange, bisexual]

I have ... a male long-term partner, and he is definitely the primary support for all sorts of things, including being bi. [Amy, bisexual]

a number of my female partners... have been bisexuals, and that's felt supportive, it hasn't felt like there's been anything to have to be.

[Kate, bisexual]

Family

Many women had stories of support and affection, together with varying amounts of understanding, from their families. Some families had received news of their daughter or sister's sexuality warmly and joyfully:

My older sister was the person I called when I thought that I was a lesbian and I cried ... when I finally said it she goes, 'Oh, is that all?' ... Mum was really envious when I told her that I had fallen in love with a woman because it's something that she always wanted to experience and never did. [Nicole, bisexual]

my parents ... weren't that shocked at all. It took a lot to muster up, like letting them know, but they were ... great... having people that do support me and understand and ... give you such unconditional love, I guess it makes things easier... [Gemma, bisexual]

Some women were able to point to characteristics of their families which had provided them with resources for a thriving life in general terms. Acceptance and connection were recurring themes: 'Mum ... was never racist or judgmental of other people, which I think really helped ... having that acceptance.' [Ange, bisexual]

a lot of difficult times that my family has gone through ... made our nuclear family ... pretty accepting ... you might not understand people or necessarily like their behaviour, but you kind of accept them, there's no rejection of a person because of how they behave. [Jessica, queer]

A couple of the bisexual women we spoke to felt there was an unspoken understanding about their bisexuality in their families, even though they had never explicitly come out. They felt their families knew and had chosen not to make the subject a topic of conversation:

my mother is totally accepting, in her ignorance or supposed ignorance, and is very much a part of our family, and has adopted the dog as the family grandchild. ... so we're acting like an extended family to some extent without ever being an acknowledged extended family. [Zoe, bisexual]

Some women could point to the way their families had behaved toward them and in the wider community as having provided them with tools of confidence, understanding and optimism that were critical to their adult wellbeing:

I was brought up witnessing the possibility of connecting with everyone, and ... that was really helpful ... approaching people with that attitude you get a lot more out of life... Also there was violence in my family when I was small... and my father, who was the perpetrator, changed... and ... that was a very powerful thing ... I grew up with ... a basic understanding that it is possible for people to change bad behaviour... [Kate, bisexual]

Others described aspects of their families that helped them thrive as bisexual or queer specifically:

[my grandmother is] Dutch ... one of the things she said to me when I was talking about being gay was, 'Oh, everyone in Holland's gay these days, you should just watch the television.' (laughter) She totally like just sees it as a natural variation of the human species. [Erin, queer]

10 Thriving as a bisexual or queer woman

Tips on how to flourish

it took [Mum] a while to sort of understand where I was coming from... Later on my Dad guessed that I was queer and disowned me ... Mum ... became twice the parent ... she's been really supportive ... my partner transitioned from being male to female, and while my mum doesn't fully understand things she's really supportive and ... [accepts] both of us as being women. ... I just think I'm really lucky to have such a great mum. [Lena, bisexual]

One woman spoke of her parents' dedication to recognising her unique qualities and supporting her in developing them to the full: 'My family have accepted me as a very strange little creature... but I never felt that I was strange because ... my family just loved me all the time.' [Rebecca, bisexual]

A few women had queer role models in their own families. 'I have an aunt that's a lesbian... my parents used to say, "People fall in love with people, and that's just the way things are."' [Alexia, bisexual]

I had queer aunties in my family and they were openly a couple. You know, my mum said ... when she was growing up she just assumed all grownups slept in the same bed, and it was a complete non-issue. ... my mother ... had female partners as well as male partners when I was growing up... her friends ... were as often gay as they were straight, so ... there was never any sense ... that sexuality was fixed through your life... [Liz, bisexual]

'It's about having a life': Groups and Organisations

All of the women we interviewed found participating in groups a source of wellbeing. They belonged to many different kinds of groups, but their sense of the ways groups could contribute to a thriving life had a lot in common. Groups provided a sense of connection which counteracted isolation:

particularly being queer, you can feel pretty isolated and feel like the only one, or the freak, or the person who's not going to be accepted, ... being part of a group or talking with people of similar experiences helps to reaffirm that you are a normal person and that... not everyone is judgmental. [Lena, bisexual]

Groups and organisations provided places to make friends, meet people and have fun. For some women the element of structure that a group could provide created a way to find their place in their community:

I really do feel like formal organisations ... provide a really good outlet, a good structure, a good place for me to feel a part of things. [Jessica, queer]

I actually got involved in the [support for newly identifying GLB people] organisation through becoming a [volunteer]. And so through that is actually how I sort of got connected to the community ... [Ange, bisexual]

Groups of many different kinds (queer groups, community groups, sporting clubs, choirs, bands) provided support, as well as the opportunity to be part of shared projects:

I've been in various bands and they've been places of great support. And also any group where you're involved in a joint effort to do something that feels worthwhile. [Kate, bisexual]

trade unions are great groups to support your sense of wellbeing. ... the times that I'm most stressed are work-related, not personal ... and, with the union behind me, I've been able to be stronger and management haven't been able to sack me so I've got money, and that's making me well. (laughs) [Alana, bisexual]

12 Thriving as a bisexual or queer woman

Tips on how to flourish

They also provided a sense of acceptance, and more:

[State bisexual organization] make me feel happy... they're the most accepting bunch of people as a group that I've met. ...[they are] friendly and they make me feel needed and wanted. [Alana, bisexual]

For many women, organisations provided places where they felt they could relax:

I'm a member of [state bisexual organization]... I just find them very open-minded, sensible people. ... I just feel really comfortable there. [Jenny, bisexual]

[lesbian professional organization] is a place where sexual diversity is embraced, but also where there's that understanding about those professional issues, so it's been absolutely fabulous. It's like you can ... relax. [Kate, bisexual]

Some women felt that their work in queer community organisations had significantly changed their sense of themselves for the better: 'it's about giving something back ... that ... boosts your self-confidence, learn heaps more skills.' [Ange, bisexual]

I feel very confident myself, I very rarely get down ... [I used to] worry about what other people that are biphobic or homophobic out there think of me, I very rarely get upset about that any more, and I think that's because of the support that I've had. [Ange, bisexual]

Being with people who were positively focused and thriving helped Erin to achieve those goals in her own life:

I started volunteering [at a service for young, same-sex-attracted people] ... a lot of the people that work there are in a fairly positive space so are generally quite self-aware, healthy, balanced people. It's a really good environment to be that yourself, I guess.

Some women specifically mentioned groups which allowed for sexual exploration, whether that involved flirting, kissing or sex parties:

I chose [state bisexual organization] to go to because ... we had a few things out in the open to begin with. ... If you go to a normal pub and you try smiling and flirting with women, sometimes they don't know why ... [state bisexual organization] flirt outrageously... They have very nice parties [Alana, bisexual]

the [state bisexual organization] have really ... provided] permission ... that really opened up the potential for expressions of bisexuality ... they just cuddle you. ... there's a lot more physical touching and affection ... I've just been able to open up to myself and to ask myself questions about what do I want in ways I haven't even thought of asking before. [Amy, bisexual]

Groups also offered the chance to hear other people's stories and to tell your own. Bisexual-specific groups had allowed women to hear other bisexual people's stories about their lives and their responses to common stereotypes about bisexual people. This woman was on an email list:

I find [it] really fascinating and ... comforting to read everyone else's stories about what they're going through and... how people don't understand, or people question it, or think you're in a transitional phase, you know. ... being part of a bi group, as opposed to just gay/lesbian group, I find a lot more ... supportive and yeah, cool. [laughs] [Gemma, bisexual]

While hearing stories from similar points of view was helpful, several women also said they learned from hearing the stories of people who were different to them. The level of diversity they had found put their own sense of difference into a context that made them feel more of a sense of ease:

I love hearing about how other people deal with their families, how they deal with their workplaces, and also just seeing the amount of diversity. I mean you can never second-guess who a person is or where they've been: it constantly surprises me and makes me feel a lot more comfortable about myself, hearing all that stuff. [Jessica, queer]

For others, though, being part of bi- or queer groups meant that they could relax about issues of sexuality, and talk about other things when they chose, knowing that their sexuality would not be problematic for other group members.

sexual identity becomes not a non-issue, but something that just underlies the other things that you're doing... and that allows for a sense of wellbeing, in that ... [sexuality is] part of who you are, but it's not defining who you are. But if you want to have an intense conversation about it that's fine, too... there's no sense in which I'm going to horrify someone or scare the horses or whatever. [Liz, bisexual]

Although many women recommended groups as a way to meet other people with things in common, and as places where those commonalities could be explored, many also said that groups allowed for a focus outside yourself and onto the bigger picture:

having a common interest..., being able to be absorbed in something outside yourself together with other people is good for me, and most people. ... If I don't have that ... I can [end up] very up my own arse. [laughs] [Kate, bisexual]

14 Thriving as a bisexual or queer woman

Tips on how to flourish

Many women had stories about having tried out various groups before settling on one that really worked for them. Some had encountered groups that were not welcoming:

when I first ... decided, 'Yeah, right, okay, I'm [bisexual],'
... I sort of went on the gay and lesbian volunteer line
... one of the main people... thought I was a lesbian and was bagging bi people and so I was like, 'Fuck that, I'm out of here'. [Gemma, bisexual]

They stressed the need to consider what kind of organisation might provide the opportunities you were looking for, and to try out several before assuming groups aren't for you. Jenny suggested:

try to find the right people... if you can find a good bi group that... treats bisexuality as part of the whole, ... treats people and its members with respect I think that's helpful.

Some women we spoke with experienced joy and satisfaction in the difference they were able to make by *organising* groups. Many spoke about being pleased to be able to make a contribution:

[Advocacy organization] really values what I have to offer ... [it] builds my self-esteem, and I'm giving something back ... I get a good feeling and I give something ... so it's an upward spiral.
[Jenny, bisexual]

I'm involved with ... the [Queer] Festival and the [Queer] radio programme... being involved with those things makes me feel like I'm contributing, makes me feel like I've got a voice... I feel like I'm breaking down stereotypes and that I use that involvement as a vehicle to promote bisexual existence (laughs) and to hopefully encourage other people to accept it and think that it's okay. [Nicole, bisexual]

One bisexual woman relished her role as a role model:

I'm a bit of a matriarch now... I can sort of more set a model for [younger people] and they can sort of come to me for information, or just to know that someone can actually make it this far and be happy, and it's like an example, you know? And that it's not a phase you're going through. (laughter)
Not if it lasts over twenty years...Some helluva phase.
[Alana, bisexual]

Others described their delight in being ready and able to support others. Rebecca said: 'I spend a lot of time and energy 'giving back' and making connections, because of the help I've been given to reach this place of thriving in my life.'

I feel like I've carved out this space for myself and then, when I feel really comfortable in that, the next step is wanting to share that with other people ... that, in turn, kind of affirms the space that you've created.
[Alexia, bisexual]

Eva summarised the benefits of participating in groups:

Oh, I think it's about agency, it's about power, it's about making a difference, it's about the informal networks, it's about having a life.

Groups mentioned as contributing to queer & bisexual women's wellbeing

Bi Pride Australia

BiAdelaide

Bi Victoria

FEAST organising groups

Brisbane Pride

Brisbane Gay and Lesbian Choir (welcomes bisexual members)

Australian Lesbian Medical Association (accepts bisexual members)

Voyeur-X

Trade union

Online polyamory discussion list

Online lesbian discussion list

Bi polyamory discussion group

Advocacy and support group for women survivors of sexual abuse

Songwriters Association

Polyamory social group

Sports teams

Cross-dressers' support group

Melbourne marching girls

Online bisexual discussion lists

State transgender organization

East Timor Campaign

Youth advisory committee to state government

University students' queer group

Bfriend

Peer support for newly identifying people

TAFE

Wet on Wellington

16 **Thriving as a bisexual or queer woman**

Tips on how to flourish

‘Strength in numbers’: Community

Bisexual and queer women told us that participation in community was crucial to their wellbeing. However, their sense of community came from different places. Some women found their sense of community in their interactions with people, and felt it was less important where they met those people and what they had in common with them. Others told us their sense of community was centred on bisexual organisations, the gay community or the women’s or lesbian communities. Amber saw queer community as home: ‘I find ... being involved with ... the actively and explicitly bi-friendly, bi-welcoming areas of the queer community as a whole ... very affirming and very positive.’

Some women found a sense of connection around sexuality in the kink scene or the polyamory community (on or offline). Liz was openly negotiating multiple sexual partnerships (polyamory) and found the kink scene bi friendly and supportive of her choices:

I think there’s something about the kinky scene and the bi scene ... that kind of goes, ‘Okay, well, once we are being flexible among one set of rules... we’re willing to experiment with the all-or-nothing model of you’re either married or single’.

Other women found participation in the events and collective spaces of their local community a source of wellbeing. Jessica said:

I feel very strongly connected, even just going to the supermarket or whatever. ... I go out into the community... and I feel very much like I’m part of it. People know who I am. And I do get that thing in the supermarket queue where people recognise me... that all makes me feel really warm and rosy! (laughs)

No matter where they found their sense of community, women were able to identify a substantial number of ways in which community contributed to their wellbeing. Participating in a wider community meant meeting up with other people regularly, whether that was at meetings, social events, games, bars or parties. Leanne said: ‘[Community] curbs the isolation for me. When I do find myself isolated, being within the groups will just enhance my wellbeing and how I feel about myself.’

A sense of connection through community provided a sense of support which allowed women’s confidence to grow: ‘my self-confidence... really bloomed when I ... got more and more involved in the LGBT community and ... queer politics.’ [Ange, bisexual]

[Community] helps me be more confident about coming out when I need to or when the opportunity arises... it’s hard to have the confidence to do that when you’re feeling isolated and alone. So I guess it gives a bit of a sense of strength in numbers. [Lena, bisexual]

18 Thriving as a bisexual or queer woman

Tips on how to flourish

Being part of a community of peers with shared experiences and some shared values made women feel accepted, welcomed and 'normal': 'just having that collective peer experience is really important, feeling just like you're just a normal, average human being.' [Erin, queer]

it's really important... to ... surround yourself with people who support your identity and support your choices. ... I prefer ... to surround myself with images and stories ... that I can relate to... values that I agree with. [Alexia, bisexual]

Amy described the benefits of being part of a community where there were diverse experiences of 'being bi, being poly, being ... transsexual and transgender', yet where she felt everyone knew what it was like to feel 'different':

Hearing so many different experiences of people coping ... in the wider community with being different. ... I like the fact that they've both got the same experiences and different experiences, and I learn from the different experiences and I breathe a sigh of relief with the same experiences.

Community could also be a source of role models:

you get, 'Oh, that person is proudly, openly bisexual and has relationships with men and with women, and they're okay and ... they're a good person for me to look up to' [Nicole, bisexual]

Many women found being part of a community provided a place where they felt they did not need to constantly explain or justify themselves or their choices. Kate said: 'the queer environment is a place where certain things are just kind of understood and don't have to be explained.' Amber found community central to her wellbeing because it meant she did not always have to censor herself:

it's very important to me to have ... a community of people... for whom being bisexual is unremarkable. They don't have to be bi themselves... but ... where ... I can just let my hair down and talk about my partners or that cute girl I saw there or that really hot boy... and I don't have to feel like I'm having to edit my words ... I'm always doing that otherwise. ... there's so much weight attached to the whole damn thing in other environments that it's just really nice for it to be a non-issue. [Amber, bisexual]

Many women told us that community made a big difference in their lives and they highly recommended it as part of a good life:

find other people who are bi, other people who have been there done that, or other people who are doing that at the same time ... find people to talk to, find people who you can be yourself with, it just makes so much damn difference. [Amber, bisexual]

Get around with positive people, like-minded people and yeah, make sure that you're being treated the way you deserve to be treated, and treat yourself and others the way that they deserve to be treated (laughs) [Erin, queer]

[Interviewer:] Is being involved in bisexual or queer or women's community part of your strategy for thriving?

Well, it's not a strategy, but it's certainly part of the joy. ... It just makes you feel more whole, really. More diverse and still fitting in perfectly. [Zoe, bisexual]

Events and Places

Some women mentioned specific events and venues within their communities of choice as contributing to their sense of wellbeing. In some cases these venues were places in which women felt they were part of a larger community, and that sense of being part of something bigger that welcomed and recognised their bisexuality or queerness was part of the joy they described. For one woman from a smaller city where gay, lesbian, bisexual and trans people organise and socialise together in quite a close-knit way, the opportunity to be part of an international gathering of *bisexual* people had meant a lot: '[in my state] there's not a huge bi community. ... actually hanging out with people that all identified as bi was really powerful...' [Ange, bisexual]

Rebecca talked about the critical role of a women's library in her sense of herself as a bisexual woman and a feminist, intellectually and personally:

It was important to me because, intellectually, I've always, all my life, been interested in issues and justice and literature ... it was a very radical expression of what a library stands for. ... it was personally really exciting to be in a situation that was just so supportive intellectually, and I got a lot of confidence, encouragement, everything from the literature that was coming from the Feminist Movement... [Rebecca, bisexual]

Others described venues and events organised around socialising and partying as critical to their sense of wellbeing because they created spaces of acceptance and inclusion in which each woman felt able to be herself and relax:

'the first pansexual nightclub in Australia' 'knowing no boundaries of sex or gender' [has opened in my city]... and that's been a really good place ... sometimes as a bi, particularly as a transgender woman as well, you sort of feel like a bit of meat, whereas [at the pansexual nightclub], ... everyone's just there as the person they are ... it's just a supportive place to go out and be, and ... there's not going to be any hassle if you want to pick [someone] up ... they'll just say, 'No' or something, rather than, 'Oh, get away!' [Jenny, bisexual]

Another woman spoke about what she liked about going to a BDSM nightclub where she felt accepted and part of a wider community. The club had:

an atmosphere in which people might be curious as to your sexuality but are not fussed at what the answer would be one way or the other. ... there is no way of thinking about sex or doing sex that would be problematic ... it certainly contributes to wellbeing, because you're not worried about hiding a part of yourself ... [Liz, bisexual]

Specific venues opened up opportunities for sexual exploration and provided new experiences which women said contributed significantly to their thriving as *bisexual* women specifically.

[My state bisexual organization] have ... drinks in the city, and that's really fun... There's a couple of people who have spa parties at their place, which are just outrageous fun ... there's ... a lot of just cuddling and talking and sitting round the fire and chatting or leaping in that spa or. I love kissing, you know, and there's lots of people who are into kissing. ... you do what you feel like doing and if you say 'no' that's fine, you know, and if you say 'yes' that's fine.... [Amy, bisexual]

Coming Out

Many women told us that coming out had been a crucial element in achieving the lives they wanted to have, a turning point in their emerging sense of themselves as queer or bi. It allowed Jenny to leave behind the pain and denial she felt before coming out:

I still remember the really critical point of coming out ... I got a long way down by blocking [my gender identity and sexuality], wondered what would happen if I opened it up, and just life really has ... gone up ever since then.

Some women described how difficult it had been to come out in the beginning, especially if they hadn't been fully confident in their own identity. Almost every woman described making decisions about when, where and who to come out to. Many chose coming out to friends first, and used the growing sense of confidence they felt to come out to workmates or family later. Safety was crucial. Maya stressed that it was vital for each person to make their own decisions about when and how to come out and who to come out to.

people have this idea that you should just come out and be proud, but sometimes it's not safe to come out... you shouldn't beat yourself up about not being completely honest, if it's in your own safety.

Liz had found ways of coming out that allowed people to respond positively or neutrally.

[it's] been a conscious strategy... to think about how I might share [information about my sexuality] in a non-confronting way ... And generally people are just interested and ask questions, or say something about themselves.

Although the women who shared their stories with us acknowledged that coming out could involve risks, they emphasised that it could also be richly rewarding. Coming out made it possible to access community, feel good about yourself and build a sense of personal integrity and pride: 'You're more likely to find like-minded people [if you're out].' [Kate, bisexual] 'I've ... found my life and found my niches ... from coming out...' [Jenny, bisexual]

22 Thriving as a bisexual or queer woman

Tips on how to flourish

Some found coming out a very positive experience. Being open about themselves had given other people in their lives a chance to express their support and warmth.

*once I decided I was [bisexual] I just came out to everybody. ... I sent letters to all my friends, letting everybody know at once. ... everyone just was like, 'Yeah, cool...' My parents were great. ... I've always been very comfortable and I've always had such a beautiful, lovely, supportive group of people and family, so I'm very lucky.
[Gemma, bisexual]*

Many bisexual and queer women described being out as allowing them to be themselves in more aspects of their lives. It meant they didn't need to pretend or hide, and were free to build relationships and relax more. Liz said: '[Being out is] a place to be yourself ... there's less that you have to explain or is a mystery to people.' Jessica felt that being out took less effort:

I think being dishonest and being closeted or being not open with the people around you about your life and your feelings and your attractions ... takes more energy (laughs) than being open about it.

Others described being out as emerging from their pride in themselves and their community, and being out with other queer people as a source of delight. Jessica, for example, said: 'I like standing together publicly... I think it's important to be really visible. That makes me feel good, I love doing that.' She explained:

I feel really great about who I am when I'm able to be very comfortable and very open and very articulate to the people around me about who I am. So I think ... that's the most important [thing for my wellbeing].

Personal Strength and Being True to Yourself

Bisexual women told us that liking yourself and being true to yourself contribute to a sense of wellbeing. Some women said that being true to themselves was their key strategy for thriving. Several women made it clear that self acceptance and having positive self regard are the basis for believing that you deserve to have a good life. This belief allowed women to seek out supportive environments and made it easier for to avoid destructive circumstances and to take on important challenges:

I don't care too much what other people think... It's like 'Oh well, tough if you don't like it.' I've never really taken that on board, you know, 'You must be this, you must be that and you must be earning this amount of money by this year in your life.' [Jessica, queer]

Self esteem and self acceptance

Having good self esteem was highly recommended: but how do you get there? Women said that personality traits such as self reliance, intelligence and optimism supported their wellbeing. But for many women, self acceptance was the really key thing:

A lot of it has to be the strength within...It's about accepting who you are and working with that...It would be nice to have a big support group and, you know, all of those things, but at the end of the day you're yourself, and if you know you can survive with that, everything else is the icing on the cake. [Emily, bisexual]

Exercising your own judgment about your own life rather than applying other people's ideas or advice or accepting other people's standards was critical. A number of women told us that having confidence in themselves gave them the strength to resist stereotypes and make their own choices.

life isn't about kind of living someone else's expectations; it's sort of living up to your own, really. And not being afraid to take risks: I'm a risk-taker... when you think there's something that you really want to be or do ... just going and doing it. Because life's too short not to. [Jessica, queer]

24 Thriving as a bisexual or queer woman

Tips on how to flourish

Understanding the kind of person that you are and making decisions from that starting point was a strategy that many women recommended:

I've always had a strong sense of myself as an independent woman, being a law unto myself, even when I was young and intensely shy. And I choose to be celibate, to spend a lot of time by myself. I need a lot of solitude to stay alive and alert. [Rebecca, bisexual]

*Know that your experience is **your** experience, and whatever other people experience are **their** experiences, and they're all as real as each other, and just support each other [Erin, queer]*

A number of women talked about the difficulty of achieving self acceptance. They did not see self esteem as a resource which they had from the beginning, but something they had achieved through working at it. One woman described this as an internal process:

Being happy is about becoming self-referred. Looking at the world from your perspective. Rather than trying to put expectations from other people on yourself ... it's about just looking in your own heart about what you're passionate about and what feels right to you and going with that. ... It just really makes me happy and really makes me more resilient, because if you've got that passion behind what you're doing it's much easier to not listen to people who ... want to get you down. And ... the rewards are endless. [Alexia, bisexual]

Another woman talked about there being internal and external aspects to the process of coming to like yourself:

You have to try and like how you look, and ... if you don't like how you look, you modify yourself so you're the best you can be to your own eyes ... You get your hair right, ... you're comfortable in how you're looking, because if you're in any way self-conscious about what you're wearing and what you're doing, then you're not going to have as much fun. ... it's so much easier if you can get to like yourself. ... Because you've made yourself into a nice, wonderful, sexy, fun person and that's all you can be expected to do, and eventually somebody will appreciate that. [Alana, bisexual]

Following the path of desire

Several bisexual women told us that pressure to choose either a lesbian or a heterosexual identity had been a stumbling block to achieving self acceptance for them. Realising that the choice to be bisexual was available and that it was OK had been a critical moment for several women who spoke with us, one that had allowed them to achieve self acceptance and, in some cases, been critical to their sense of self:

when I ... went into my first same-sex relationship, for a while there I... [thought] I was just denying the fact that I was a lesbian... not realising for a little while that there was a choice and I didn't have to choose to be straight or gay, I could be bisexual. ... it took a while to realise that, 'Hey, I'm never going to choose a side; it's just whoever I'm with is the person that I'm in love with at this particular point.... But who I'm with doesn't determine my sexuality.'
[Ange, bisexual]

As a bi woman, ... some days I wake up and I'm attracted to men and some days I wake up and I'm attracted to women, [I] just ... [keep] on reminding myself that that's okay... I don't have to ... identify with a tag every single day of my life... It comes down to self-acceptance, you know? [Alexia, bisexual]

For Liz, coming to terms with non-monogamous relationships was more important than identifying as bisexual:

[It] was probably a bigger move for me than whether I identified as straight or bi to actually say, 'Okay, I'm a person who is willing to go out with people in an open relationship, and that means that I get the benefits of... the sex and the fun and the company ... without feeling like I'm a threat to someone else's partnership or I'm involved in lying to someone' ... that's a ... much bigger development... in my sexuality than identifying as bi.

Some women were mystified by other people's negative attitudes, because they were completely clear that their sexuality made a positive contribution to their lives.

[Bisexuality is] okay, you know..., you've got the best of both worlds! ... everyone falls at a different place along the whole bell shape of sexuality and it doesn't matter where you fall, it's okay. [Gemma, bisexual]

being a bisexual woman, it's just one of those things. I don't even think about it very much. Kind of fell into it and it feels comfortable and I don't do a great deal of angsting over it. I just got lucky. There wasn't anything particularly hard. Ever. [Zoe, bisexual]

Honesty

Many of the bisexual women who spoke to us had experienced pressure not to identify as bisexual or to speak openly about their bisexuality. Some had been told that being bisexual made them less trustworthy. Perhaps as a result, many of the bisexual women had strong opinions about the value of integrity. Several bisexual women nominated honesty as a central strategy for achieving wellbeing. Personal integrity and honesty could be expressed through coming out;

To be able to be honest about who I am with all people—straight, queer, bi, everyone— really contributes to my sense of wellbeing. If I'm honest about who I am, who I'm in love with, how I live my life, how I'd like to live my life, then that is really, really valuable. [Nicole, bisexual]

Several women spoke about the harm that they felt could result from self-censorship or pretence, stressing how vital honesty was to their wellbeing.

I need to be able to speak freely or to at least try to speak freely about who I am... I need to be able to have the option of not self-censoring all the time because for me that's totally destructive. I cannot be in a state of wellbeing, I cannot thrive, if I'm doing that. [Amber, bisexual]

I've known a lot of people who ... pretend to be lesbians ... to make it more acceptable and ... fuck that. I'm sorry, I could never do that... I can be in a straight relationship but I'm still bi. I can be... in a lesbian relationship, but I'm still bi.... I'm big on honesty in all aspects and areas of my life. [Gemma, bisexual]

Although most women stressed the ethical need they felt to be honest, many saw other benefits in being honest. For some women, being honest with other people had been a path toward feeling more confident and sure in themselves and their choices:

when I was coming out... as a bi woman... one of the lesbians [I lived with] just did not understand it at all and I had to actually spend a lot of time kind of justifying myself to her, and I think that was really a very good thing for me, actually. It just really made me kind of go... 'I'm not one or the other' ... I had to ... explain to her that ... I wasn't messing with people; I wasn't ... in a transition phase. ... once I'd kind of convinced her ... that was such a good thing for me because it just really made it a lot more ... firm in my mind as well. [Gemma, bisexual]

While honesty in relationships with other people was important, several women also spoke about the need to be honest with yourself. Two women told us that an honest appraisal of what they wanted in life was an important first step in proceeding to build a good life. 'That was the real turnaround as I started to ask myself, 'Who am I and what do I want?' and started to feel empowered to get what I want.' [Amy, bisexual]

‘Doing What You’re Passionate About’

Many women told us that doing what they were passionate about made a big difference: ‘it doesn’t matter what that is, ...doing what you’re passionate about ... is really important.’ [Ange, bisexual] Women listed a huge range of passionate activities from zine making, instrument playing, sport, stand up comedy, reading, staring at the ceiling, sleeping and sex to singing, songwriting, walking and work....

Physical activity

Exercise was a passion and a source of joy for many. Almost every woman in this group recommended physical activity as a path toward wellbeing. ‘I do a bit of exercise. ... I need to do a bit more! That always makes me feel much better.’ [Nicole, bisexual]. Erin said her wellbeing required ‘plenty of time for the beach! (laughs) Plenty of time just to go in the bush. ... Keeping fit.’

Some women had chosen specific activities, such as walking, circus skills, sex or belly dancing:

belly-dancing... is something that I enjoy doing and find that really helpful to get rid of stress and to be challenged in a different way from intellectually, and improve fitness and stuff like that.
[Lena, bisexual]

I think [sex is] part of the physicality of life. Good sex contributes to feeling good, and particularly if it can be the sort of sex that encompasses kind of caring, tender stuff plus things that are really robustly physical, that feels good. [Kate, bisexual]

Some women spoke about a direct relationship between the amount of exercise they were getting and their moods or mental wellbeing:

Exercise has been great ... just my energy level, mood level’s improved ... I think that helped me clear depression, actually.
[Jenny, bisexual]

Creativity

Every woman we spoke to was involved in some kind of creative activity that she was passionate about, and spending time in these activities was highly recommended. Partly this was simply about spending time doing what you really enjoy:

Music has always provided my strongest sense of identity and place in the world. It is my greatest talent and my drug of choice. ... my interests ... [are] not specific to my identity as a bisexual, but they are ... specific to my sense of achieving wellbeing in the world. [Rebecca, bisexual]

However, it was also a way to find a way through difficult times and painful emotions and to express yourself. Creativity could be 'an outlet, ... a stress release, ... a way of figuring things out about what you're going through' [Jessica, queer]

songwriting's good, although it's hard work. But to ... find a creative way of dealing with intense emotions does help me with them a lot ... part of getting over it ... is finding a way to express it, and sometimes mysteriously, some time later, that will be obviously part of the healing process. [Kate, bisexual]

Work

Some women found their work a source of wellbeing for them as bisexual or queer specifically, because their workplace was queer-friendly. Erin said: 'I work in a pretty queer-friendly sector, which makes a difference. [laughs]'. Liz said:

my workplace is a place where there are not just other bisexual people and gay and lesbian people who are open to non-fixed identities, but is also a place where sort of thinking about different styles of relationship ... is encouraged, rather than frowned on...

However, work had other benefits. Apart from providing an income, it provided a structure which was helpful for some:

I think it's a simple thing [work provides] it's having structure and routine and those sort of they're essential things that contribute to a good mental space. [laughs] Yeah. [Erin, queer]

Work could also provide the pleasures of a successful group project:

I have found that working hard with a group of people at a job which is difficult and getting a sense of achievement and accomplishment is tremendously supportive. [Kate, bisexual]

Choosing risk and adventure as a path to well-being

Several women were passionate about taking risks and being prepared for adventures and said that it was critical to their wellbeing. Some of them described risk taking, courage and fearlessness as attitudes they take toward their lives. Eva said that 'being active and courageous' was key to her wellbeing. She also said: 'Having an enquiring, curious mind, having a sense of adventure, that helps.' Others described choosing activities that were outside their zones of comfort as something they sought out or actively created in their lives.

Alana said it was important to 'go out and have fun' and experiment with the unknown:

*Don't die wondering. ...If [you]'re wondering about BDSM or ... what it's like to go to an orgy and be naked with all these people, just try it. If you don't like it you don't have to go back.
[Alana, bisexual]*

Jessica thought that risk taking in things that mattered to her was so important to her that she 'couldn't be another way'. She said it was possible for her to take risks that others in her life wouldn't contemplate because: 'I don't care too much what other people think... It's like "Oh well, tough if you don't like it."'

30 **Thriving as a bisexual or queer woman**
Tips on how to flourish

Spirituality

We asked women whether spirituality contributed to their having good lives as bisexual and queer women. Many stressed that organised religion did not contribute to their wellbeing. Some described their religious backgrounds (which were mostly Christian) as having created difficulty for them. A few believed that their family's refusal to accept or celebrate their sexuality resulted from their family's commitment to Christianity. One woman spoke about new age spirituality as having elements of gender stereotyping she found difficult. Others had experienced religion as damaging, anti-sex and homophobic, and had chosen to reject religion as incompatible with their wellbeing.

I've concluded that institutionalised religions sucks, basically, (laughter) and irrespective of what I believe in ... my sexual orientation ... my queerness, is definitely okay and is perhaps even a [positive] element in me. [Erin, queer]

Many others spoke of complete disinterest in religion. While some acknowledged it as a cultural presence in their lives (one woman described herself as culturally Jewish but identified as a humanist), others saw religion as irrelevant to their wellbeing:

I don't believe in God at all. I believe when you die you're eaten by worms, the worms are happy, that's it. ... I have no religion and I don't believe in God and afterlife ... if I turn out to be a really nice person and help you through life, just take it for what it is. [Alana, bisexual]

Despite the strong criticisms women had to offer about organised religion, however, most women we spoke with described some kind of spirituality or spiritual practice as crucial to their wellbeing.

Tips on how to flourish

This is what I believe and this is how it contributes to wellbeing

Most of the bisexual women found spirituality a fundamental part of who they were (though their experiences of spirituality were widely varied).

my bisexuality and ... spirituality ... are important to who I am, to who I sense myself as and how well I feel I'm thriving. [Leanne, bisexual]

Leanne went on to say that spirituality contributed to her wellbeing because: 'It has to, it doesn't have a choice. It's just there.' For some women, bisexuality and spirituality were profoundly linked:

I ... have a spirituality of a sort, it's just not a very religious type. And I'm really not quite sure how to verbalise how it fits in with bisexuality ... they both contribute to who I am and they are a fundamental part of who I am in the world, they're certainly both positive things for me, ... when I'm in a really good space sexually I feel it feeds into my spirituality... When I'm feeling really positive and on top of the world in a sexual sense ... I'm more likely to be feeling positive in a spiritual sense at the same time. It's all kind of intertwined. [Amber, bisexual]

I'm not totally goddessy, airy-fairy, but there is a certain element in which the linking of sexuality and spirituality and the rejection of a split between the mind and the body has been very sustaining for me... How do you care of yourself? How do you take care of others? What is a community? What is love? Or what is intimacy? Those are all spiritual questions, those are all sort of about a sense of the self that isn't just about ideology or politics, but is a very sort of spiritual question. [Liz, bisexual]

I chose paganism because it's a spirituality that's affirming of queerness and bisexuality and where bisexuality may even be an asset instead of some kind of moral problem to get over. [Lena, bisexual]

Some women felt that spirituality offered them sources of wisdom that helped their lives go well:

I do take on that cosmic kind of belief...that there is something greater than me that ... will give me some more wisdom if I'm able to sit quietly and listen. And whether that's the inner strength or ... the wisdom, the old ladies, the whatever-it-is, or gut instinct... listening to that has given me direction and support within myself. [Emily, bisexual]

[Spirituality] contributes to my wellbeing as who I am, and I am bi as part of who I am. ... I've always had a sense of 'the divine' or spirit ... [and] 'prayer', which is the sense of interacting with spirit, inviting spirit in to situations and people and circumstances, and listening for guidance or ideas or something, and asking for help. [Amy, bisexual]

Some women's spirituality was organised around a sense of something beyond themselves which felt fundamental to their sense of self:

I think for me spirituality's contributed to my wellbeing in a really fundamental way... for me it's just an underlying feeling of everything's okay and the world is okay and having a connection to everything, and a basic belief in the value of life. ... it's kind of like a foundation thing for me. [Jessica, queer]

I ... just get that sort of magical wonderment feeling, and sometimes that connected feeling to something bigger than we are, and I think that's important ... that's just a part of who I am... [Ange, bisexual]

You know, the trees, the birds, the sky, the water, the rocks. I get a deep sense of godliness, wholeness, from nature. [Eva, queer]

Spirituality... keeps me in touch with a bigger picture and sustains me... it helps me with patience and endurance to keep going. [Rebecca, bisexual]

Other women spoke about concrete spiritual practices which supported their wellbeing and resilience:

for me, the thing that works best is to go to bed early, to get a good night's sleep, and then to stay in bed in the morning and either read or meditate or do some tarot or some, you know, some sort of focused spiritual practice ... because I will be much more deeply centred in myself and I will be less frazzled, ... and I'll be more aware of myself, more in tune with myself, more able to respond to changes in myself...
[Amy, bisexual]

if I'm unnecessarily anxious about something and I make the time to meditate it's directly helpful, it just makes me feel better, makes me function better, helps my thinking; and as a regular practice it helps a degree of equanimity.
[Kate, bisexual]

I consider myself pagan, ... when I am more actively practising and meditating and doing ritual and all those sorts of things, I feel a lot better, I feel calmer and more peaceful and sort of more grounded. ... I think that if I spent more time listening to my intuition and doing spiritual things that maybe some of the burnout and negative things that I've experienced wouldn't have happened. [Lena, bisexual]

A sense of goodness was central to some bisexual women's sense of spirituality.

I had depression in my early twenties, and I really feel like getting into spirituality got me out of that. Just ... believing that there are higher goals in life than just, you know, standard models of success and that sort of thing. And that being happy is about... looking at the world from your perspective. [Alexia, bisexual]

Some women drew on their spirituality to provide ethical guidance. For Kate this meant having:

some sense of there being value in certain behaviour and certain ways of thinking and ways of approaching people; ... a very strong sense that things beyond the material are important.

I wouldn't have a sense of wellbeing, I don't think, if I didn't have a certain sense of what I thought was right and wrong ... a sense of rightness, I guess, a sense of caring about the world around you. [Jessica, queer]

34 **Thriving as a bisexual or queer woman**
Tips on how to flourish

Health care providers

We asked women whether health care practitioners had helped them thrive as queer and bisexual women. Many of the women who responded weren't sure whether their health care providers knew that they were bi or queer. Some had chosen not to disclose their identity as bisexual, or had felt that it was unnecessary to disclose it. Alana said: 'the sexuality issue wasn't raised [with my GP] and doesn't need to be.' Zoe explained: 'For the stuff that I've needed being bi is not an issue.'

Decisions to disclose queer or bisexual identity were not taken lightly. Most women chose to disclose their sexual identity only when they felt it was necessary, relevant to the treatment they were seeking and safe. Some women felt that raising sexuality with a health provider was a risky thing to do, and had chosen not to disclose their sexuality in order to protect their wellbeing.

Some of the women who had used sexual health services had chosen them specifically to get their sexual health needs met while avoiding talking about their sexuality with their GPs. For example, Amber said the STI clinic 'was quick and easy and... there's not a big furore and big explanation like with your GP.' Leanne said she knew the STI clinic 'goes over the whole gamut of all sexualities, so I knew that would be an okay place, rather than spring it on my GP.'

Some women had decided that coming out to their medical practitioner was important to their wellbeing. The fact that Kate had told her sexual history to her GP meant that she could have explicit conversations with her GP about making sure specialists would treat her with respect.

it really helps that my GP knows that my current relationship is with a woman but that I've had sex with men in the past, so that she ... would not send me to someone for whom that was a problem. And in fact we discussed, ... 'If I'm going to be sent to a psychiatrist, can you be confident that ... queerness... won't be pathologised?'

36 Thriving as a bisexual or queer woman

Tips on how to flourish

Other women we spoke to were referred to specialists with no confident expectation of being treated in a non-discriminatory way.

Ange also felt that telling her doctor about her sexuality was important:

because I am confident and okay about my sexuality, I'm okay about telling [my GP] everything that I need to tell him... whereas somebody who was frightened that the doctor would judge them and hasn't got so much self-esteem, they may not be able to tell the doctor everything they need to be telling him to be able to make a good diagnosis.

Women described a range of criteria they use in choosing a health practitioner. Many mentioned seeking a practitioner who would have suitable expertise, both about their health concerns and (where relevant) in relation to sexuality issues. However, women were also seeking non-discriminatory care. Lena said: 'I want someone who's going to treat me with respect and not be a bigot.' Alexia was completely clear that choosing an appropriate, non-homophobic practitioner was important to her even if she was in a monogamous relationship with a man: 'even if I'm like in a relationship with a guy, a monogamous relationship, I'd still want a doctor or

whatever that was queer-friendly.' Similarly, Jessica said: 'I wanted to go to somebody who had the skill... but also the acceptance of homosexuality as being okay.'

Several women said they would not go back to a practitioner who did not meet their basic criteria:

I make it clear that I'm not monogamous pretty early on, and if the doctor had seemed to have had a problem with it I would have not gone back... So I guess I came out... in terms of my identity as... non-monogamous in an ethical way. [Liz, bisexual]

Most women who said that health practitioners had contributed to their well-being mentioned the open-mindedness, bi-friendliness or queer-friendliness of the practitioner or service they had chosen. In some cases, being treated in a neutral way was enough. For example, Lena said: 'gender and sexuality sort of aren't relevant to [my GP], he just treats me as a person and that's really good.'

However, queer-friendliness was not the only thing women identified as crucial to achieving health care that contributed to their well-being. The practitioner's level of skill was also important:

I love my doctor... I trust his judgment, but that's like less ... about being bisexual and more that I actually had [a medical emergency] a couple of years ago and he identified it straight away and was supportive and able to help me get through that. ... when I burnt out last year he recognised I was suffering from depression ... and was able to help me with that. [Lena, bisexual]

Every woman we interviewed had chosen practitioners they thought would meet their criteria based on a careful process of decision-making. Referrals from trusted people were one of the strategies many women used. Friends were the most common source of information about suitable practitioners.

I talked to my friend who is also a bisexual woman, and she was the one that referred me to [my current GP]. ... no matter what service I need I ask friends first. [Lena, bisexual]

Many women chose their health practitioners on the basis of their association with women's health or the queer community:

I've headed myself towards overtly woman-oriented health practitioners... through either ... word of mouth or just knowledge that they are happy to treat me unremarkably. And so therefore I've had very positive experiences because ... I've been pretty certain before I've chosen them that they'll be able to embrace me for who I am. [Leanne, bisexual]

the counsellor ... I've got now ... used to work ... at the [AIDS Council]; and the GP's with [a] Clinic which is ... right in the heart of [the] gay strip ... so you know that you're going to get both knowledge and sensitivity on virtually anything you bring up. [Jenny, bisexual]

A high proportion of the bisexual and queer women we spoke to had experienced good care from sexual health services. Everyone who mentioned a sexual health service had received non-discriminatory service, and many women were wholeheartedly enthusiastic about their experiences with sexual health clinics. Leanne described her delight in finding 'bisexual' offered as a box she could tick on the form at a sexual health service:

I was asked about my sexuality ... filling in their forms... I really was very happy and ticked 'bisexual'. ... [laughter] ... It felt really good that I was even asked. And I felt quite strong to have ticked that 'bisexual' thing, because it probably was my first time I'd ever encountered [it].

Women mentioned a range of aspects of sexual health services that contributed to their well-being and confidence in the service. Having sexual identity, number of partners and sex of partners treated as unremarkable was mentioned by several women.

the STD Clinic ... ask all the right questions... in a very non-discriminatory ... way like 'How many partners in the last little while and what sex?' and ... it's just not a big deal, and they don't seem to react regardless of what I answer... they don't presume anything. [Amber, bisexual]

the doctors [at Family Planning] are ... really open and stuff. ... when they ask their screening questions... they focus more on behaviour than identity, but it's ... nice to have that recognition that not everyone is straight. [Alexia, bisexual]

Liz had chosen a sexual health clinic over a women's health service because she found it more sex-positive and queer-friendly than the women's health service she had previously visited: 'the Sexual Health Centre I went to as a more queer-friendly space... in terms of understanding casual sex a little better than the classic women's health model might do.'

Some interviewees had chosen educating their GPs as a strategy for getting good care. Two women mentioned participating in training health care providers in the hope that they and others might receive better care in the future:

we train doctors through the AMA in sensitivity training, like trying to raise their awareness of how to talk to people ... basic stuff on sexual orientation and [gender identity] [Erin, queer]

These interviews show that these bisexual and queer women put considerable thought, effort and planning into organising good health care for themselves.

Emergency treatment where women had little or no choice about the practitioner they saw presented specific difficulties which often could not be dealt with by these methods. One interviewee described an experience in a hospital emergency department where gender identity was clearly relevant to treatment, but in which disclosure felt impossible. Kate also said: 'I've had bad care sometimes, particularly in emergencies.'