



# A Behavioral Pilot Intervention for LGBTQ+ Adults to Enhance Social Connection and Self-Acceptance



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## INTRO

- Queer visibility is rising, with 7.6% of U.S. adults and one in five Gen Z adults identifying as LGBTQ+. Yet mental health challenges remain disproportionately high. In the past year, over 39% of LGBTQ+ adults reported having a mental health condition, and 48% of transgender adults reported suicidal ideation. These issues have worsened amid rising anti-LGBTQ+ policies nationwide. Research shows social connection and belonging protect against psychological distress, with queer individuals in supportive communities attempting suicide at half the rate of those in unsupportive ones. While psychotherapy helps, many face access barriers and report experiencing stigma from providers.
- The Awareness, Courage, and Love (ACL) model is a peer-to-peer intervention that builds close relationships through reciprocal vulnerability and responsiveness. ACL has been shown to effectively enhance connection and reduce loneliness across diverse groups, but had not previously been studied in LGBTQ+ populations. Our mixed-methods pilot study yields promising results that support the utility of ACL as a peer-led approach to promoting LGBTQ+ well-being beyond traditional therapy.

## METHODS

1. We employed a 4-session ACL intervention developed in collaboration with local LGBTQ+ organizations and community stakeholders. The intervention targeted 1) contact with the authentic self, 2) self-acceptance and self-compassion, 3) value alignment, and 4) presence.
2. Seven LGBTQ+ individuals participated in intervention (n=3) and control (n=4) conditions.
3. Each week, all participants completed a battery of quantitative measures, including ones assessing social connection and self-acceptance, and provided qualitative feedback.

## RESULTS

- Participants in both conditions found the sessions helpful and connective. Intervention participants specifically reported benefits from the meditation, creative exercises, and vulnerable sharing. Across conditions, participants expressed gratitude for a safe, queer-affirming space, *even when LGBTQ+ topics weren’t explicitly discussed.*
- Several participants reported increased social engagement and voiced a strong desire for additional sessions. However, attrition was high. Some initially recruited participants were unable to attend due to health issues, family emergencies, or concern of not being able to respond to others’ vulnerability.
  - “People are kinder than you think they are.”
  - “[I am using] the Pomodoro technique while working and am leaning on my queer friends more.”
  - “[I am proud of] learning to carry empathy to someone else’s struggles.”
  - “It’s okay to be vulnerable sometimes.”

## DISCUSSION

- ACL appears to be a safe and affirming peer-led intervention model with the potential to enhance social connection and belonging within the LGBTQ+ community. This approach provides a scalable and accessible mental health resource outside of traditional psychotherapy. However, targeted strategies for reducing attrition and increasing the number of sessions are warranted.

LGBTQ+ participants reported feeling more socially connected and having a stronger sense of self after partaking in a queer-led ACL group that emphasized reciprocal vulnerability and responsiveness.



### WE WANT YOUR INPUT!

One intervention participant dropped out because they feared that they would be unable to contribute meaningfully to the group.

How might future interventions address this concern? What would you want to explore in a follow-up study?

Intervention gAyCL				
Scale	Min.	Max.	Mean	SD
Dejong Loneliness Scale	0.55556	0.83333	0.73148	0.11872
Social Connectedness	3.1833	4.55	3.8261	0.59429
Psychological Sense of LGBT Community	3.2273	3.6061	3.4343	0.15678
Self Acceptance of Sexuality	4.3666	4.5667	4.4722	0.087981
Montgomery Asberg Depression Rating Sclae	1.7777	3.5185	2.5	0.67271
Anxiety	0.75	1.3333	1.0417	0.24008

Control gAyCL				
Scale	Min.	Max.	Mean	SD
Dejong Loneliness Scale	0.29167	0.58333	0.45139	0.11612
Social Connectedness	4.4375	5.0702	4.7888	0.21602
Psychological Sense of LGBT Community	3.6932	4.2273	4.0595	0.19387
Self Acceptance of Sexuality	4.625	5	4.8625	0.12624
Montgomery Asberg Depression Rating Sclae	1.2222	2.5556	1.9691	0.44578
Anxiety	0.59375	0.96875	0.75521	0.13609

### WANT TO LEARN MORE ABOUT ACL?

- SCAN HERE, OR VISIT OUR WEBSITE:
- <https://www.livewithacl.org/>



### LET’S CONNECT!

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References available upon request.