



# Working with Women and Gender Diverse Veterans

Mary Harlinger, Ph.D. (she/her)  
VA Pacific Islands Health Care System  
Health Behavior Coordinator/Licensed Psychologist  
LGBT Veteran Care Coordinator  
[Mary.Harlinger@va.gov](mailto:Mary.Harlinger@va.gov)

Why might we consider gender and gender identity when addressing housing needs?



*Social determinants of health*

# Healthcare Disparities

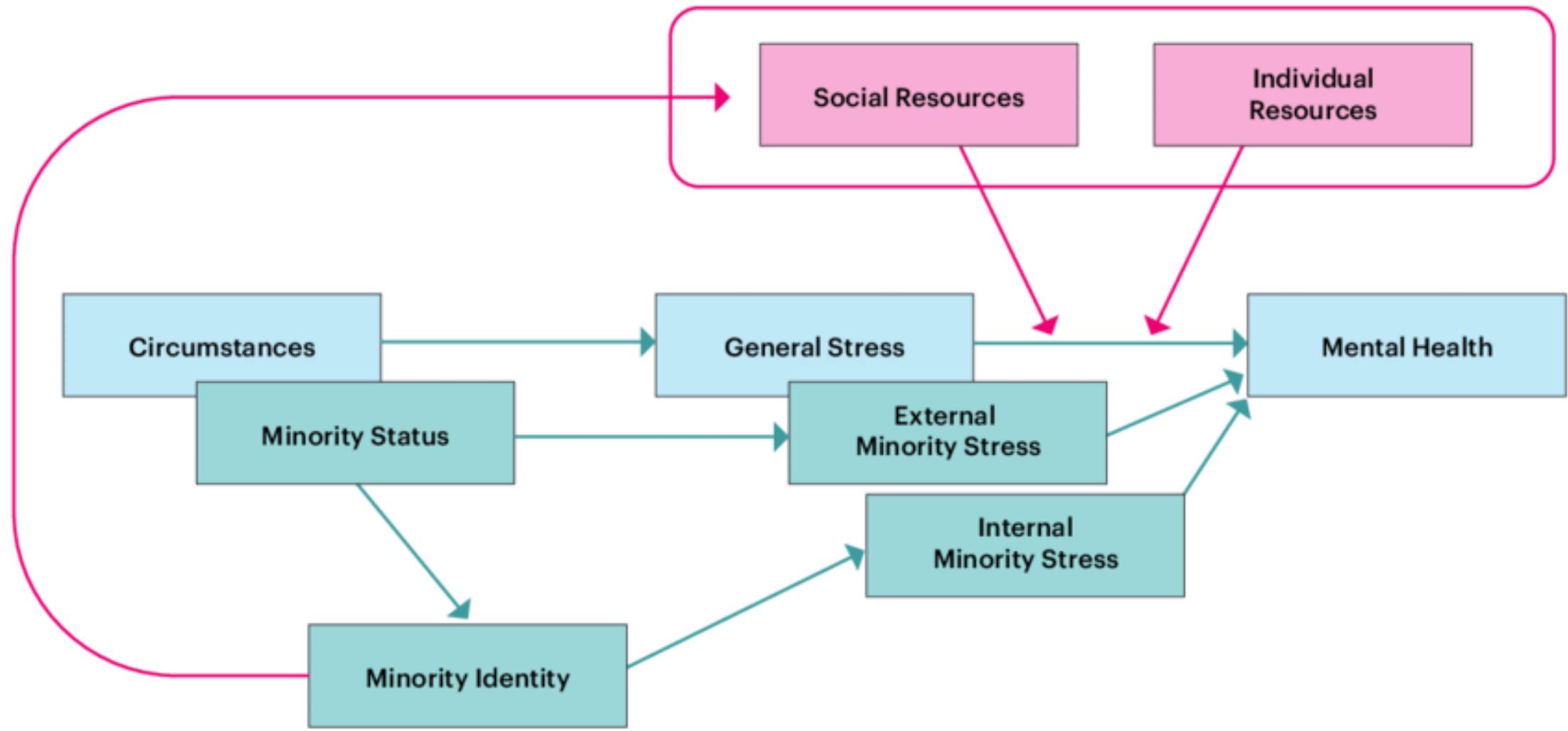
- Healthcare disparity is a difference in health status of different groups of people.
- Can be from:
  - Intentional harm: harassment, refusal of care, discrimination
  - Unintentional harm: lack of awareness of needs, fear of being rejected by provider, no outreach efforts



# Meyers Minority Stress Model (2003)

- Minority stress comes from societal structures outside of the individual's control
- The stress is chronic and ever present
- It is occurring on top of other general stressors





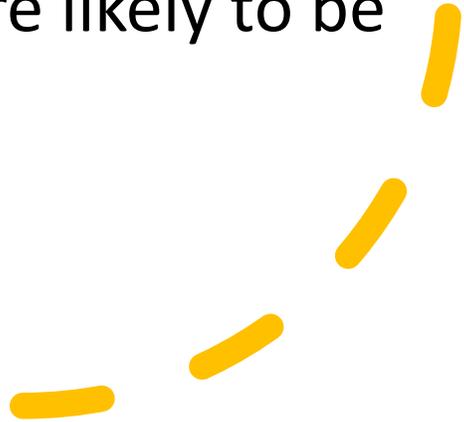
# Women Veterans

- Minority in VA healthcare
- Have more complex needs
- Typically must attend multiple visits to get the same level of care that men are able to get in a single visit

(Yano, Haskell, & Hayes, 2014, p. S703)

Women Veterans are four times more likely to be homeless than non-Veteran Women

(Gamache, Rosenheck, & Tessler, 2003)



# LGBT Veterans

- Lesbian and bisexual female Veterans at increased risk for suicide (Lehavot & Simpson, 2013).
- Transgender Veterans risk of suicide is twenty times higher than for general Veteran populations (Blosnich et al., 2013).

Transgender adults experience housing instability at rates approximately 2 times higher than cisgender counterparts (Carter et al., 2019).



# LGBT Terminology

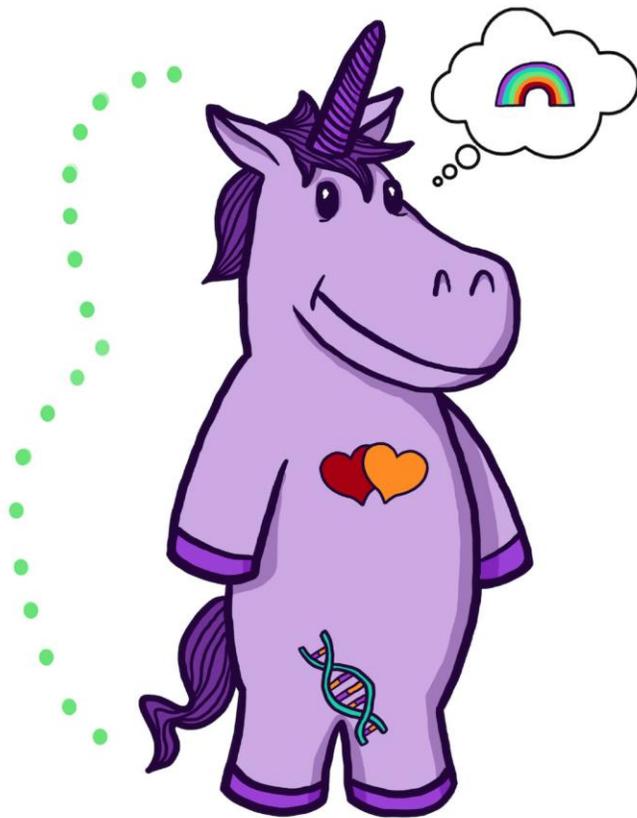
- Lesbian: a woman primarily attracted to other women
- Gay: a person who is attracted primarily to members of the same sex. Often used to refer to males
- Bisexual: a person who is attracted to multiple genders
- Transgender/gender diverse: a term covering a range of gender identities that can vary from *socially defined* gender roles/norms

# Terminology

- Lesbian, gay, and bisexual groups are related by sexual orientation.
- Transgender/gender expansive groups are related by gender identity.

# The Gender Unicorn

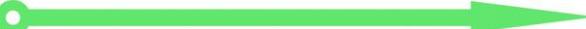
Graphic by:  
**TSER**  
Trans Student Educational Resources



## Gender Identity

-  Female/Woman/Girl
-  Male/Man/Boy
-  Other Gender(s)

## Gender Expression/Presentation

-  Feminine
-  Masculine
-  Other

## Sex Assigned at Birth

- Female      Male      Other/Intersex
- 
  - 
  - 

## Sexually Attracted To

-  Women
-  Men
-  Other Gender(s)

## Romantically/Emotionally Attracted To

-  Women
-  Men
-  Other Gender(s)

To learn more, go to:  
[www.transstudent.org/gender](http://www.transstudent.org/gender)

Design by Landyn Pan



# Military Culture

- Regulations around appearance
  - Prohibited from certain occupations
  - Feelings of safety
  - Don't Ask, Don't Tell
  - Ban on transgender military service members
-

# Veterans History Project

- **"It doesn't matter how good you are or who is supporting you...even then, you would get discharged."**- Interview with Richard Dean Williams: clip 31:56 to 33:27 (01:31)



# Considerations

- Is the culture.... (sexist, heterosexist, transphobic, etc.)?
  - The question of “Will I be accepted?”
  - Unique challenges:
    - Constantly coming out
    - Role models and support
    - Healthcare considerations
      - Provider knowledge
      - Administrative
-

## Health Conditions Among the Homeless Population in Comparison to the General US Population



HOMELESS

HOUSED

← VERSUS →



18%	Diabetes	9%
50%	Hypertension	29%
35%	Heart Attack	17%
20%	HIV	1%
36%	Hepatitis C	1%
49%	Depression	8%
58%	Substance Use Disorders	16%

Source: Health Center Patient Survey (HCPS) 2009

Housing as  
Healthcare

# What should we consider?

- Emotional or moral injury
- Deeply held beliefs about the world, self and identity, etc.
- Triggering events (higher likelihood of trauma events)
- Personal assumptions/knowledge base



# Culture of Affirmation

- Engage in self-reflection about personal stimulus value.
- Normalize the adverse impact of minority stress.
- Empower assertive communication.
- Validate unique strengths of Women or LGBT individuals (without romanticizing hardships)
- Foster supportive relationships and community development.

# Culture of Affirmation

- Authenticity and compassion
- Language of acceptance
- Inclusivity with forms, discussion point, or questions
- Use “Veteran” as the honorific title with their last name
  - “Veteran Smith”

# Goals

- Provide information about services available
- Advocate and support safe, equitable housing resources and policies for women and transgender Veterans
- Assist with care coordination



# VA Programs

- Supportive Services for Veteran Families Program
  - U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development and VA Supportive Housing Program
  - Grant and Per Diem (GPD) Program
  - Women Veterans Health Care Program
  - VA Mental Health for Women Veterans
  - Center for Women Veterans
  - LGBT Veteran Care Coordination
- 



Questions/Comments?

# References

- Blosnich, J. R., Brown, G. R., Shipherd, PhD, J. C., Kauth, M., Piegari, R. I., & Bossarte, R. M. (2013). Prevalence of gender identity disorder and suicide risk among transgender veterans utilizing Veterans Health Administration care. *American Journal of Public Health, 103*(10), e27-e32.
- Carter, S. P., Montgomery, A. E., Henderson, E. R., Ketterer, B., Dichter, M., Gordon, A. J., ... & Blosnich, J. R. (2019). Housing Instability Characteristics Among Transgender Veterans Cared for in the Veterans Health Administration, 2013–2016. *American journal of public health, 109*(10), 1413-1418.
- Gamache, G., Rosenheck, R., & Tessler, R. (2003). Overrepresentation of women veterans among homeless women. *American Journal of Public Health, 93*(7), 1132-1136.
- Lehavot, K., & Simpson, T. L. (2013). Incorporating lesbian and bisexual women into women veterans' health priorities. *Journal of general internal medicine, 28*(2), 609-614.
- Meyer, I. H. (2003). Prejudice, social stress, and mental health in lesbian, gay, and bisexual populations: conceptual issues and research evidence. *Psychological bulletin, 129*(5), 674.
- Trans Student Education. (2015). The Gender Unicorn. <http://www.transstudent.org/gender>
- US Department of Veterans Affairs. (2020). Veterans Experiencing Homelessness: VA Programs to End Homelessness Among Women Veterans. [https://www.va.gov/homeless/for\\_women\\_veterans.asp](https://www.va.gov/homeless/for_women_veterans.asp)
- Veterans History Project. (2011). Richard Dean Williams interview. Library of Congress. [https://memory.loc.gov/diglib/vhp-stories/loc.natlib.afc2001001.87499/afc2001001\\_087499\\_mv0001001\\_640x480\\_800.stream?start=1916&clipid=d14133e144](https://memory.loc.gov/diglib/vhp-stories/loc.natlib.afc2001001.87499/afc2001001_087499_mv0001001_640x480_800.stream?start=1916&clipid=d14133e144)
- Yano, E. M., Haskell, S., & Hayes, P. (2014). Delivery of gender-sensitive comprehensive primary care to women veterans: implications for VA patient aligned care teams. *Journal of General Internal Medicine, 29*(2), 703-707.