LESBIAN ZEST:
Tips on How to Thrive and Flourish

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With financial support from the Australian Lesbian Medical Association (www.almas.net.au/) and Flinders University (www.flinders.edu.au)

Layout and design by Miska Graphics
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Twenty seven lesbians told us about where they get support and what helps them to flourish. They also offered advice and tips on how to thrive as a lesbian.

These were their main points;

- Treasure your friends
- Gain nourishment from your community
- Birds of a feather flock together
- Be adventurous
- There are many passionate pursuits and many sources of strength
- You need to believe in yourself and care for yourself
- Come out and don't let anyone put you down

Friendship is sustaining and friends are a great source of satisfaction in lesbian life. There is great value in friends with whom you don't have to explain everything because they are already 'on the same page.' The support of like minded people is an antidote to isolation and friends are a resource to draw upon for advice, information and companionship.

Many lesbians cherish their nearest and dearest lesbian friends, the ones they can 'come home to', and who give them a 'really solid footing on this earth.' They value the frank advice they receive from a range of friends with a range of skills. These friends act as a buffer against a hostile world as well as being a source of inspiration, support, intellectual stimulation and affirmation. Some lesbians value friendships with men and women of all sexual persuasions, especially those who reject homophobia and a few argue that friendships with a diverse range of people promote a broad view of life.

Being part of a community is a great tonic for lesbians. Community involvement is a source of nourishment providing access to safe social settings, events, ideas and types of support which would not exist otherwise. Many lesbians are invigorated by large public events and gatherings. A visible community provides affirmation. Being connected to a network is important to lesbian well being. There is often a sense of mutual obligation. Community work and community building contribute to a sense of wellbeing. Lesbians take pride in contributing to social change. For some, community has replaced family relationships.

Many lesbians consider themselves a part of the lesbian community. A sense of being part of a feminist movement and preferring the company of women are often linked with a lesbian identity. Some feel that this is a sisterhood and expect

to find a similar mindset amongst other lesbians. Even some who do not attend lesbian social events feel that the lesbian community validates their view of the world and that it is available to them.

Others are part of gay or queer communities, gaining a sense of solidarity by seeing rainbow flags in the street, listening to gay radio and knowing that they are surrounded by other gay people. They see a great advantage in having access to a queer community.

Lesbians are members of numerous other communities based on shared interests other than sexuality. They believe that community membership has great benefits and some doubt that it is possible to thrive as a lesbian in the absence of a community.

Lesbians recognise that there is great diversity within their communities. This variety can provide many role models. Expanding your sense of community to include a wider range of people can be enriching, although it's not always easy to get along with each other.

Participating in lesbian, women's or gay groups and organisations contributes to the wellbeing of many lesbians. They enjoy a variety of groups and organisations. Some are purely social, some explicitly political, others are performing troupes or sporting clubs.

Groups provide a sense of belonging, safe environments to relax in, social contacts for friendship and networks to draw upon. They are places where lesbians can have fun and be joyful. Lesbians feel nourished, invigorated and rejuvenated by participating in groups. They enjoy the sense of collaboration, reciprocity and achievement which is the outcome of shared projects. They appreciate opportunities to meet new people and learn new skills. Participation provides support networks which may extend across the country or around the planet.

Conversation in these groups might not even mention lesbianism, but often social and political topics are discussed. Some women continue to reap benefits from groups such as student unions and women's organisations long after they leave, because the political ideas they were introduced to were so valuable.

Finding the right group can be a complex process and some are easier to join than others. Just knowing that a group exists and that it is acting in your interests can be supportive, even if you rarely attend functions. Some lesbians find it rewarding to lead or organise groups. They have a sense that

this is contributing to their community. Having the skills and taking responsibility for running a group builds self esteem. Becoming a group leader can act as a rite of passage.

Exploration and adventure are two important strategies for discovering the things that will nourish you. Some lesbians believe that risk taking is demanded by a lesbian life. Having the courage to do new things, meet new people or see yourself in a new light were all recommended as strategies for flourishing. Lesbians hope to find open mindedness amongst other people, and many strive to keep an their own minds open by stepping outside their own comfort zones, talking to people very different from themselves, and seeking out new experiences.

These lesbians recommend **choosing risk** and adventure as a pathway to wellbeing. They consider that the benefits outweigh the costs. The more rewards you get from taking risks, the more inspiration you have for dreaming up new adventures.

There are many passionate pursuits in a lesbian life. Passionate involvement and engagement is nourishing and satisfying. Work can be enriching and fulfilling, especially if your workplace provides a positive environment for lesbians. Studying can contribute to wellbeing. Making music, singing and many forms of creativity are enriching and fulfilling. Many other things add zest to lesbian life. Lust, exercise, rest and eating well were all recommended. Sports, walking and bike riding are amongst the many vigorous pursuits which can contribute to lesbian wellbeing. Reading, yoga and meditation are renewing and nourishing activities. Keeping animals, having fun, playfulness and enjoying yourself were also highly recommended by lesbians who had benefited from them.

There are many sources of strength for lesbians. Some identified tangible resources like money and housing. Imagining what a flourishing life as a lesbian might be like can show the path toward wellbeing. This might come through the revelation of meeting someone who is clearly thriving as a lesbian, or from the advice of experienced friends or mentors. Books and libraries with lesbian collections had provided women with ideas. Lesbian music and stories were a wonderful tonic in comparison to 'being surrounded by heterosexual everything.' Lesbians might find their own experiences mirrored in a book, or they might find answers to questions they were asking about how to proceed with a lesbian life. Seeing lesbian lives depicted on television might be affirming, but some found the images bizarre. Others were excited whenever they heard from other lesbians through mainstream or gay media.

When they considered the elements which support them and contribute to wellbeing some identified things they had learned from the families they grew up in. Those who had been encouraged to think for themselves, to engage in discussion and to assert their rights appreciated what they had learned. Others attributed their sense of humor to their upbringing. Values considered to be relevant to a lesbian life included; treating people the way you would like to be treated, never giving up on people, having a sense of social justice, treating people fairly, rebelling against injustice, encouraging difference, being aware that you are part of a community and wanting to reach out to other people. Struggling against families had also taught some valuable lessons and developed a strong sense of self.

Views on the value of **spirituality** were widely varied. Some lesbians had spiritual beliefs which nourished them, others rejected spirituality completely. Several argued that organised religion is a health hazard for lesbians. There were many different explanations of how spiritual beliefs contribute to wellbeing. Some lesbians believe that there is something greater than themselves or feel a spiritual bond with other women, or with other people who struggle for social change. Others describe their sense of purpose and destiny as spiritual. Some practice contemplation or meditation or make contact with the power of nature by gardening.

Believing in yourself can be a springboard for deciding to look after yourself, not allowing other people to get you down, seeking out settings where you will feel comfortable, avoiding situations which are destructive and being willing to take risks. To thrive as a lesbian you need to hold yourself in high esteem. A positive view of yourself is the basis for believing that you deserve to thrive. Some lesbians saw self acceptance as an intrinsic quality, or as a gift of their upbringing. Others had made conscious decisions to build self confidence.

Resisting denigration is very important for lesbians. One issue which many lesbians identified as detracting from their wellbeing was homophobia. Homophobia makes you feel bad about yourself. Understanding that homophobia is not your fault is important in retrieving self esteem. It takes energy to confront homophobia and lesbians speculated about where they get the strength to resist. Strength may grow through overcoming adversity. Lessons from history may show lesbians a way forward. Some use reframing to develop a positive spin on their circumstances. Knowing where to find support is an important survival skill and having enough self esteem to take good care of yourself is essential. Leaving undermining relationships behind can make room for new relationships and moving on to a better life.

When you believe that you are valuable, taking action to care for yourself makes sense. Lesbians told us about steps they had taken to care for themselves. Several saw attending to their mental health as necessary work. Some had found therapists and counsellors to assist them.

Lesbians who had found helpful **health practitioners** appreciated those who made it their business to find out more about lesbian health concerns, those who were friendly towards lesbians, and those who asked inclusive questions rather than making lesbianism invisible during the consultation. Finding a good practitioner can be a challenge. Referrals often came from other lesbians, from women's health services or from the gay press.

Many lesbians recommend **coming out**. They acknowledge that things won't always go well, but families, work colleagues and acquaintances can be surprisingly supportive. Coming out has many rewards and was seen as a generous act, providing affirmation for other lesbians and improving the wellbeing of gay people generally.

The following sections present more of their words on each of these topics.

Treasure your friends

Friendship is nourishing and sustaining for lesbians. Lesbians see friends as a great source of support. Some form friendships only with other women, many especially treasure their lesbian friends, some enjoy friendships with a broad range of people and appreciate their friendships with heterosexuals. Friends are precious and valuable even if you don't see them very often. Liz said;

> *I have some very, very long-term friends who have just stuck it out, they've just stuck it out. The older some of my friendships get, the more they flourish. You see the path that's actually happened and, 'Hey, we're still here'... that's an incredibly precious feeling.*

The social, conversational and emotional time lesbians spend with their friends is very important. Gina talked about the great value of friends with whom you don't have to explain everything because they are already on the same page and Maddy explained;

> *It's sense of connection, relaxation, totally being yourself ... I can imagine it would be like being a migrant and finding people of your own nationality, so you can speak in your dialect. We have similar frames of reference and things. So I guess that's the same with my friends, most of them are queer. Just about all of them are, really.*

Mitch told us that you can talk about things that are essential when you don't have to go through layers of explanations;

> *Those kind of friends I think are just totally valuable because you can cut to the chase, sort it out, move on in your own thinking. I think those people are crucial and essential. They're the kind of people I'd never let go.*

And Zeynep said;

> *I think if you can find like-minded people you grab them and you don't let them go ... You ride the energy that you have with them to help you thrive.*

What does friendship provide?

Friendship is a great source of satisfaction in life for lesbians. Marg told us that the support of like minded people is an antidote to isolation;

> *What makes me not thrive is that having a sense of isolation and being different, and that difference considered to be a bad thing. With my friends, we do talk about our sexuality and things that affect us, that make us different. But we're sharing that. I think that sense of sharing is the thing that's stopping that isolation.*

Tash said her friends provided insulation from hostility;

> *My nearest and dearest are lesbian women who've known me for a long time, who love me and think I'm a good woman, and who have been with me through the good times and hard times and been part of those years of enquiry about being a good person in the world and being a lesbian of integrity, and all that sort of stuff. They're in my heart and I carry them in there all the time. Then there is another sort of ripple, you know, a circle around that ... some that have been alongside me trying to make sense of the world and I was alongside them as they made sense of the world, and so they have another bit of my heart that isn't about my day-to-day life, but it's just such a joy to see them when I see them. And I've been really blessed in that those two layers are quite thick layers, in terms of buffering me from the forces in the world that tell me I'm not okay and that being a lesbian is to be spurned or shunned or whatever.*

Friends are a resource to draw upon for advice, information and companionship of different kinds.

> *For me it's having a good, broad range of close friends or contacts ... just having like a finger in lots and lots of different pies so that if you feel like you need a particular sort of company or information you've got resources to draw on.*

Lesbian friends

Lesbians cherish their nearest and dearest lesbian friends, the ones they can 'come home to', and who give them a 'really solid footing on this earth.' Toni's tip is that 'you call on your lesbian friends and you care for your lesbian friends carefully.'

Lesbians value the frank advice they receive and the opportunity to get good advice from a range of friends with a range of skills. Kaz remembers her early lesbian friendships;

> *They would say, 'I did this and this happened, this was the consequence. You might choose to do it differently, but I did this, this and this.' It's that variety of advice, rather than, 'This is the only way to do this.' And I think that was much more attractive, seeing women who had ways of going about things.*

Jess pointed out that your friend's advice may be very wise, even if you don't like the sound of it;

> *Listen to what your nearest and dearest are saying around you and be aware, if you're getting defensive around it or just sort of pushing it away or whatever, because there really could be some truth in it.*

Lesbian friends are a source of inspiration, support, and intellectual stimulation. Kath is quite clear that her wellbeing depends on their input;

> *What makes me feel well or thriving as a lesbian is knowing I'm cared for from a variety of circles, friends, lovers. The lesbian community is very broad and very different, and has a whole range of differences, and so it's really important for me to be socialising with women who have a feminist perspective, who I can talk with. That's really important in terms of my thinking, keeping my brain active (as I'm not in the workforce any more) and that's very important to my wellbeing.*

Jemma is expecting her friends to be around to help out far in the future;

> *The group of what I would call 'close friends' that I've known for a very long time, who are my family; not my blood family but my lesbian family. I've got them on my 'next of kin' at work. It's three or four dykes who really, really matter to me. We've done formal things like agree to be each other's power of attorney and make decisions in our old age when we lose our marbles.*

Deb knows that friends are a great comfort when things get tough;

I have a very close group of lesbian friends... I think that's a very important part of thriving as a lesbian. When one of our friends committed suicide it was a very traumatic time and we all felt very vulnerable and very scared of being gay all of a sudden (because that was part of the reason she killed herself). To have that group of women was extremely supportive and made everything feel like it was going to be all right. If any of us happened to be on our own, I think the thriving would have stopped really. I think that's really important, having close lesbian friends that you can actually really talk to about stuff that it's hard to talk to straight people about. So I do cultivate and cherish those friendships.

Mari has advice about how to keep these good friends;

Investing in friends and maintaining those relationships has always been a huge benefit and a positive thing in my life. A way of having good friendships is to stick by your commitments. If you say you're going to go, go. If you're going to do this for the group, you do it. I think that's really important, and that's a key way of having good friends and maintaining good friendships. The thing about keeping good lesbian friends is reciprocation. If somebody organised something that was great, just know that one day it's your turn to get off your bum and organise something. When other people are there for you, I think it's important to be there for them, too.

Straight friends

Some lesbians valued their heterosexual friends. Shauna sees value in having diversity amongst her friends;

I think, being gay, it's good to have a mixture of gay and straight friends, so you can see things from both sides. And friends from different cultures, or other minority groups. Then you can complain about society together and it's good for bonding. And I think if people see someone who has a diverse friendship group, they'll see them as an accepting kind of person, and respond more positively. It's cyclic. Being friendly to people makes them more friendly to you. Then it makes you happy so you can continue spreading the positivity.

I know who I am, and I like to hang around with all the people I feel close to, and more than half of those are straight, just because of statistics. But it probably helps that there are other gay or bi people in my friendship groups, so that even when I am going out with a "straight" group, my straight friends are careful not to make homophobic jokes, or make assumptions, and that kind of thing.

Lovers

Lesbians get great support from their lovers. Marian sees loving relationships as a real bonus in life

Having a girlfriend who's organised and adult and loving and supportive is a really good thing. I think it's great if you can get that, but you can't always have that and that's how it is.

For Tish, being involved in multiple relationships is very important for her sense of who she is and helps her survive. Anna and Kym say of their lovers;

With my partner, she totally supports me around music. For her, seeing me thrive it helps her to thrive and for me it's the same. Seeing her thrive in what she needs to do, there's a thriving in there for me. In terms of being accepted for who I am. Feeling that level of giving and feeling that level of acceptance, and that support of who we are as individuals. And even if it means that we part ways, in terms of a partnership, we would do that rather than in any way suppress each other, to stay together. The primary thing is supporting each other in terms of who we are and what we want to do, and accepting each other.

I get a lot from my partner, she is older, and it basically means that not only has she had the life experience herself and been through all the things that she needed to go through, she also recognises that I still need to go through a number of things myself and fall on my face every now and then and make little mistakes. And she can support me through making those mistakes.

Biological family

While some lesbians are estranged from their biological families, others place great store by the support they receive from family members. Sarah says 'I've trained my family up' to provide support and Jan thinks 'they'll never really understand it' but her family members are supportive despite their incomprehension.

Gain nourishment from your community

Lesbians appreciate being surrounded by positive people, people they feel comfortable with and people who value them.

I get affirmation from my community

Involvement in a larger community provides many important benefits and forms of nourishment to lesbians. There are opportunities to regenerate and rejuvenate in a positive environment. Being in community provides access to social settings, events, ideas and types of support which would not exist otherwise. Ayla and Shada are both invigorated by large public events and gatherings;

> *Critical mass things happen when you have a whole mob of you together. Going to the Gay Games, or a conference where there's a whole heap of women en masse discussing ideas that wouldn't be discussed in other contexts ... I just love being in really, really big crowds of lesbians. You just hang out with these humungous mobs of women and it's just the best feeling.*
>
> *There's nowhere else quite like Mardi Gras or Pride, feeling like the whole world's gay and the whole world's glad that they're gay. You never quite get that feeling unless you go to those mass events. I love that. And I love being able to walk down the street holding hands with someone and thinking that everyone's just smiling at you rather than going, 'Bloody lesbians.'*

A visible community provides affirmation for a lesbian identity. Lesbians feel that it is very important to their wellbeing to be connected to a network. Some comment on the way in which membership of a community counteracts the negative impact of marginalisation. This is especially important when coming out and discovering a new identity, a new community and a new social status as a marginalised person. Lyn says;

> *That was completely fundamentally instrumental in my turning around from being very scared of being a lesbian to being accepting, to then actually getting to be rather glad that I'm a lesbian... it made me feel less like I was a sort of freak and less out on a limb and less on the very margins of society. Because I sort of realised that I was still part of a minority, but then I was within a community and so I wasn't on the margins of anything.*

Lee thinks that community membership also makes you part of a shared history.;

It is about acknowledging your ancestors. And I think it was a very powerful thing to see what happened with Mardi Gras in '78 and hearing what happened to Stonewall. One of the first things I did when I first came out was I wanted to learn about Stonewall and I wanted to learn about Mardi Gras.

Lesbians describe the safety they feel in social settings within their communities. Concerned about the corrosive effects of condemnation and victimisation, they appreciate feeling less threatened. Janelle says;

It's like I don't have to pretend that I'm not gay. If I go out then I can be who I am instead of sort of thinking, "Oh no, I can't say that here and I can't be this here." So that's really good.

Building community and reciprocating support

Many lesbians have a sense of mutual obligation. Community work and community building contribute to their sense of wellbeing. For Kate 'a really important part of my happiness is knowing that I'm contributing to lesbian lifestyle, and also to building community.'

Tess tells about her sense of pride in being part of a community which is creating social change.

I just hang out with people who are also good organisers and we take turns organising stuff. It's a way of giving back to the lesbian community much of the thought and the positive stuff that I've got by finding that as a way of living. I think making a contribution has been very helpful to me, because that's part of feeding who we are in the world and it's part of who you want to be. And also it's about being self-sustaining in some respects. You hope that other people will get things from that in the same way that you did.

This Community is my family

For Brill, community has replaced her family;

I see them as my family because I don't have any other family, as far as I'm concerned, and I haven't had any other family for the last ten years. But the first time I went to a dance I felt like I'd come home for the first time in my life, and so I've always had a sense that these people are my extended family. And so I have a sense of responsibility towards them.

Jemma sees how lesbians look after each other;

What lesbians do for each other. They go out on a limb. They care for you. It's that sort of level of caring that matters, rather than anything else. It's just looking after each other.

There are a some people who are very different to me in my community

Being a member of a community doesn't mean that you are the same as everyone else in your community. Rachel sees variety in the lesbian community as a source of many role models.

The lesbian community is a huge and varied community, and it wasn't until some time down the track that I realised how big it was, when I started bumping into other lesbians who I thought, 'I've got nothing in common with you, and yet the rest of the world thinks we do, just because we're lesbians.'...I think knowing that there's a smorgasbord and, knowing that, you can probably move in and out of some of them... there's no one way to be a lesbian, there's every way to be a lesbian.

Mina talks about being enriched by expanding her sense of community to include a wider range of people.

I had a very settled group of friends around me and I felt very settled in the bit of the community that I believed I belonged in...And so I was very content. Then in the last few years I have met lots of younger, same-sex-attracted, transgender and queer people, men and women. I've met many transgender folk who I'd never come across in a friendly way. I'd observed them in the community but I had no connection with them. I've come to a much more respectful place about people who are bisexual. I don't cringe when I hear the term "queer." I have a greater understanding of why people want to use that as a way of describing themselves. I'm not so judgmental or dismissive or disapproving. I think it's been this glorious growing thing for me at a time of my life when I was very, very comfortable with how I felt, you know, I'd settled into a life that was good for me. I was thriving and surviving very well, and just over the last few years it's gotten much, much better.

Some lesbians cannot articulate why their community is so good for them, they just have a sense that it supports wellbeing.

It's not always easy to get along

Lesbians also spoke about problems they had with their communities. Zane and Lee remember that early interactions were intimidating;

I just remember the first time I ever went to Women's Liberation and they were as scary as all get-out, those girls in there! I'd been going to a couple of meetings on campus in those very, very early days. And obviously I wasn't ready for certain things. I didn't feel comfortable there, I was intimidated. They were just so articulate and all. I knew they were onto something, but I couldn't quite get my handle on it. So I didn't keep going.

I think that when you're coming out, and you're with other queer people, most people new to the scene look around and go 'oh my gosh, they're so comfortable with themselves, they're so open, and are out to everyone and life is so easy for them. Why isn't it that easy for me?' But the truth is that everyone feels like that at the beginning. Everyone is freaked out and scared and don't know what to do and feel that everyone is analysing and labelling them. But that phase passes, and it does get easier and more natural.

Some lesbians complain about misogyny and male supremacy within the queer community. Kym said 'it's such a meat market. It's a bit gross' and Moira is embarrassed by exhibitionism at gay events.

Lesbians who reject feminism find it hard to relate to the women's community. Sara argues against the oppositional politics of making homosexuality your whole identity;

I consider myself as gay, but I it's not the first thing I consider myself to be. If someone asked 'Who are you?', I'd say I am Australian, I am female, I am a student, I'm considering going into teaching, I'm a really bad dancer, that kind of thing. Of course it's natural to become consumed with everything when you're discovering yourself and coming out. But once you're settled, I think the key is to aim to be a whole person. Those women who only associate with other lesbians and consider being a lesbian to be the most important thing in their life become isolated, and it turns into a whole 'us against the rest of the world' thing.

Lesbians may disparage each other and there can be consequences if you break 'the rules.' Nat says;

You can be feminine and sexy and not be in denial, or confused or going against the cause. Find what's right for you and don't feel as though you need to fit into a stereotype.

Lesley recommends challenging any rules you encounter;

If there's something that you hear that's quoted as a rule and it doesn't seem right to you, then question it. ... Because if I'd stuck with the ideologically sound ... I wouldn't have got to where I am now... I have learnt so much about doing relationships by doing multiple relationships. So, a tip for women is to not feel bound by a conventional life, even within a queer community or the lesbian community; always push the bounds of convention, because you never know what you might find.

You can't do well without a community

Lesbians believe that community membership has great benefits and some doubt that it is possible to thrive as a lesbian in the absence of a community.

Kath talks about what she lost when her community seemed to fade away.

It seems to have died, or perhaps we're out of the circle, I don't know what it is, but we never get together and talk about the really important things any more. I wonder whether it's going to become more and more difficult to get together just as lesbian women who share a similar past that is different from everybody else's.

Jess worries about friends who moved away from their community and have not yet found lesbians in their new areas.

Where they've gone to they haven't managed to tap into that part of their life. They're shrivelling on the bone for it. They can come back here and get it for a week or two weeks and go back again, and then they shrivel. I don't think you can abandon lesbian community and expect to thrive.

Women's/Lesbian Community

Many lesbians consider themselves a part of the lesbian community. Some feel that this is a sisterhood and identify themselves with a lesbian culture. They expect to find a similar mindset amongst other lesbians in contrast to heterosexual circles where they always remain guarded and prefer not to express their true views. Even some who do not attend lesbian social events feel that the lesbian community validates their view of the world and that it is available to them.

Several women who are part of the lesbian or women's community point out that they don't like every other lesbian in that community, but they still feel strong bonds. Shah says;

> *Even the women that I don't have a lot in common with, there always seems to be just a basic understanding of some similarity that is different from a lot of the rest of society, and that's a nice feeling.... I think I would always feel that, if I went to another city and wanted to go and meet other lesbians, I would always feel that they would welcome me... and I certainly felt that when I went to London: I never had any doubt that I would be accepted instantly into that community, and so I do feel a big part of lesbian community.*

Often feminism, a sense of being part of a feminist movement and preferring the company of women are closely linked with a lesbian identitiy;

> *This is partly because I'm a lesbian and partly why I'm a lesbian. I do bond with women and enjoy their company, and always feel comfortable with them and feel comfortable even in non-lesbian women's groups (not that I belong to any), but just the whole community is one that I feel part of.*

Joy talked about what it was that first attracted her to feminist lesbians;

> *They weren't, you know, shy, retiring sort of girls; they were in your face ... they were very confident about who they were in the world, and that's what was very attractive about them. I thought, 'Mm, I want to do that.'*

Gay/Queer Community

Many lesbians identify with the gay or queer community. They talk about their sense of solidarity seeing rainbow flags in the street, listening to gay radio and knowing that they are surrounded by other gay people. Amy was delighted when she realized that other women showing rainbow insignia are identifying themselves as lesbian or bisexual. Jess sees it as a great advantage to be queer and to have access to the queer community because it provides exactly what she needs to thrive;

I think it's a great advantage for me to be able to say, 'Well, I'm queer, I can go into this group and easily go out and meet people,' and there's always different kind of sporting groups and whatever for queers to all get along and do whatever, whereas in the straight world I think a lot of people still feel isolated... I think having other people around you is what you need to thrive.

I live in a gay-friendly area, work in a gay-friendly area and go to uni in a gay-friendly area, so I see quite a lot of queer couples in the street, and see rainbow flags flying or rainbow stickers in shop windows, or cafes with a stack of gay newspapers. That kind of thing is really great because I don't feel like I'm by myself. I feel surrounded by other queer people, I see them in the street. A lot of the shops have rainbows in the windows and distribute the gay newspapers. I am really lucky that I can feel the presence of other gay people all around me. We have gay and lesbian radio here and Midsumma is so great, I feel the solidarity.

Other communities

Lesbians are members of numerous communities based on shared interests other than lesbianism. For some, these communities are a central source of wellbeing. For others the lesbian or the gay community is most important, but they feel allegiance to other communities as well.

Several gain support from membership of craft/skill or sporting networks. One identifies strongly with her professional network and gets special pleasure from finding other lesbians in her workplace, two others participate in communities associated with the University of the Third Age. Several women point out that gays are not the only marginalized community and find support in other marginalized communities.

I work with artists. It is a treat. And certainly a lot of my support, in terms of having someone to natter with, or to protest about something that's been written. It's not even just having someone sort of safe to talk to, although that is important, but it's feeling nested in an ambience. Flourishing occurs in a culture or a medium, an atmosphere, in which lesbianism is just a non-issue. I think you flourish when you are not waging a battle. In any circumstances in which a woman finds herself in which she is affirmed, accepted, acknowledged, given a green light, does not have to battle to be accepted, prove herself to maintain her self-esteem. The absence of all those things: stigma, discrimination, prejudice, bigotry. It's more than that, it's a positive acceptance.

Birds of a feather flock together

Lesbians find nourishment in lesbian, women's and gay groups and organisations. Some are purely social, some explicitly political, others are performing troupes or sporting clubs. Participation provides affirmation, nourishment, relaxation and support networks which may extend across the country or around the planet. The benefits of belonging to groups can last long after separating from them and some organisations provide support even when women do not attend activities.

Lesbians value opportunities to have fun and often describe group activities as joyful. They feel nourished, invigorated and rejuvenated in settings which are sheltered from battles for acceptance and social change.

Trina woman told us that finding a lesbian group was the best thing that had happened to her from the point of view of thriving as a lesbian. Others give many reasons for recommending groups and explain the ways in which joining groups and organisations enhance their wellbeing. Mina says of the groups she has joined;

> *Those sorts of things help me thrive. Sometimes it's just as a person, sometimes as a woman, sometimes as a mother and sometimes as a lesbian. Yes, those sorts of things definitely add to my sense of wellness. I mean, even just playing sport with my straight friends or being involved with Queer Collectives at uni. Being involved in those ways is one of the areas that make me feel good, I suppose, or, you know, I'm thriving in life.*

Some organisations provide a forum in which lesbians develop their political ideas. Lesbians can continue to benefit from groups such as student unions and women's organisations long after they leave because participation opened their eyes to new ways of seeing the world. Myrna says;

One of the areas that was really important to me as a person at a university was the Women's Room and the feminist services. The actual political campaigns I couldn't give a shit about necessarily, but the fact that there was a women's voice and a men's voice, and there was discourse and argument and that there were campaigns about the war in Vietnam (it might be detainees now) those things really, really mattered, because those are the things that were indelibly set on me about my values and who I am as a lesbian, and the skills I have to fight campaigns for lesbians. So taking those sorts of things away is a really bad idea.

Just knowing that a organisation exists and that it is acting in your interests is supportive, even if you rarely attend functions. Rachel tells us;

The Australian Lesbian Medical Association has also been helpful. Not so much because I'm actively involved (because I'm generally not), but it's more that the organisation exists, that there's just a group of women who are doctors, who are lesbians, who make me feel like, 'Oh my goodness, there's other people like me out there.' I actually have found them helpful in a somewhat peripheral sense, just by being there.

A warm welcome is warmly remembered

Anna remembers things which made it easy to join activities;

Women's camps in general were a really great support group, like you could go along, you could go alone, you could go with friends, it didn't really matter. You could just turn up and there was guaranteed to be good food, interesting conversations, good music, a range of activities. Some of them would be more sedentary and others would be more active. And you could just join in. I think that was really supportive. There was a women's summer camp every year, and I used to regularly just go along. Even if you just went along for a few days, it was always great fun, you'd see lots of women that you'd never see any other time of the year and it was just entertaining.

Even long after they had left a group women maintain the friendships which started there and often continue to support the ongoing work of the group.

Coming out is a particularly vulnerable time. Anna and Clair remember the first groups they joined;

I still definitely thrive on the relationships that I formed during that period and still see the people and still go along and support the choir, not only because I believe in what they are doing, but they made such a difference for me. Being a young girl who doesn't fit in stereotypes of a lesbian because I have the long hair and I wear the girlie clothes and I wear lipstick and all those sorts of things. To be able to get that support and not be judged on 'You must be a fag hag' or 'You must be here with that bloke over there who's so obviously gay and you're not.'

When I first came out, the most support I got was from people at uni. It was awesome. I felt really small and scared, and alone in a straight world, but we have a support group for non-heterosexual girls, so I went to that and made friends with the people there, and they were really supportive and helpful. It was so awesome to find other women who were like me.

Finding the right group!

Some lesbians are constantly on the lookout for activities and groups to become involved in. Mitch told us that she regularly needs new projects and new groups to renew her energy levels. It can be difficult to find out which groups will provide an introduction to a community you feel comfortable with. Carla told us about shopping around to find the right group.

I came out as a teenager, and had the opportunity of a wiser and older friend by a few years, a boy, and he was able to accompany me to a number of nightclubs. And we went religiously to a number of bars every weekend, and we realised after a while that it was not the best way to meet people and we weren't meeting the type of people that suited who we were. We weren't getting the most out of our conversations with other gays and lesbians. So we decided to look further afield and just see what other options were available. We came across the Gay and Lesbian Chorus and thought, 'Gee, we both really like music, let's give this a go, could be a bit of a lark,' and went along and had an absolute ball. I got a great deal of support from them. It was just amazing, and the wealth of knowledge that I got from them and the inspiration that I got from the other members of the Chorus really helped me along, to become the thriving person I'd call myself today.

For Jade, joining a group was an entry point to a new community;

I'd just moved here and didn't know anyone. This group of young lesbians just put a notice up and we got quite a few women, lots of them came through and hung out and we used to have dinners every second week. And that was really, really supportive. From that I started running a sport group and it was mostly lesbians as well and it became really social, because we all get together every Saturday and have a game and then go out to eat or have something to drink afterwards and that sort of thing. It's rather good.

Socialising, meeting people, extending networks

Carrie explains that widening your social circle by getting to know other people in a group *'just opens up the world a little bit more because you're not restricted to just relying on a couple of people for things. So it's great.'* Many forms of support spring from meeting other lesbians in groups. Networks spread interstate and overseas and provide support in many different forms. Nada said;

Each of those groups has meant that I've met a different circle of women, and some of them have been included in my supports and some friends, and so each of those groups kind of adds each time. It's bigger than just the geographical area of Adelaide, because there's women in Melbourne and Sydney that I know as dancers. I was involved in other things, like the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival or women's health issues, or social justice issues. It's amazing how I can just ring up someone and ask them to do something, or if they know something, or how do I get something, and the support is there immediately. And for the straight world that's what they get out of friends and 'networking', for me that's what lesbian community is about.

We thrive on affirmation

Lesbians enjoy socialising with women who have had similar experiences, and the relaxation of being playful when they are engaged in struggle in other areas of their lives.

One of the really good things about being a lesbian is that, if you're just hanging out with them and going where those people and those activities are, then you're not fighting patriarchy all the time. You're actually going to where who you are as a woman is nourished and recognised and just affirmed, you know, in the songs that people choose to sing. I just think that that is really, really important.

They feel comfortable and at home in groups. This is where they can celebrate and have some fun.

I go to mostly dances because I like dancing, but the club also has car rallies and stuff like that ... if you're not a dancer there's other things you can do. What fun. So that's been a really important thing in my life as a lesbian. Singing, dancing and music is all about joy, you know. And I've sung for a while in choirs and I dance with a same-sex dance group. Dancing's such a joyful thing to do. And the other thing I do is a lot of bushwalking and backpacking. That's such a positive experience to be a bunch of lesbian women out in the bush, and going four-wheel-driving. All those things are nourishing.

Organising groups

Some women find it rewarding to lead or organise groups. They have a sense that they are building community. Jess has the opportunity to pursue a feminist agenda in apparently apolitical settings.

I also think that there's a bit of subterfuge. Like at the moment I've been involved in dancing, which is about sport and therefore wellbeing. But the three things that I've done while I've belonged to the group that's involved with blokes is that we've now got a woman who's a dyke as president, we've got much nicer blokes who are far more interested in lesbian issues, and we're starting to do community work as an organisation. So it's sort of like lesbian infiltrating and turning that pretty "blokey", non-political, organisation into a much nicer organisation. Some of that sense of community and achievement is to find other women that I haven't necessarily known and worked with them on the same set of values and get somewhere as lesbians. I would never have thought that I'd join a sporting group to be a lesbian infiltrator, but I have.

Nina and Tish told us how they had come to lead the groups they first came out in. This was quite a rite of passage.

Last year I ran the group, and it made me feel good about myself because, if I am able to help other people, then I must be doing okay myself! ... that was really great because I felt that I could help the people coming along and that was good for my self esteem.

Now I facilitate, rather than being somebody who comes and feels trepidation and nervous. And that in itself has given me further feelings of thriving in the community. Because I now feel that I'm helping people in the same way that I was helped when I first came out and that's a nice feeling as well, that you're sort of giving back something. And I really enjoy it and I really like seeing women coming in who are feeling nervous and it's their first time and just seeing them relax, seeing them blossom, being in that environment. Helping out now I feel it actually helps me as well because it gives me a sense of pleasure about being in that community.

Groups and organisations which contributed to these lesbians wellbeing

Women's activity groups; bicycling, bushwalking, marching girls
Lesbians Organising Community And Lifestyle
Gay and Lesbian choirs
Lesbian mothers groups
University Queer Collectives, support groups and student unions
Lesbians Over Forty
Rape Crisis Centre
Women's health centres
Womanspirit and women's camps
Bfriend
Lesbian Domestic Violence Action Group
Lesbian social clubs, coffee mornings, soup nights, dinner clubs
Gay sport clubs
Women's sport clubs, cricket, soccer, football
Telephone support lines; Women's Information Switchboard, Gay and Lesbian Switchboard, AIDSLine
Working Women's Centre
Women's Studies Resource Centre
Australian Lesbian Medical Association
Girlzone
ALSO Foundation
YWCA WoW group
Women's Liberation, archive and newsletter
Women's conferences
Queer conferences
International Women's Day Collective

Be adventurous

Having the courage to do new things, meet new people or see yourself in a new light are all recommended strategies for flourishing. Lesbians hope to find open mindedness amongst other people, and many strive to keep their own minds open by stepping outside their own comfort zones, talking to people very different from themselves, or seeking out new experiences. Anna says;

> *My tip is to keep stepping outside the comfort zone, to actually take the chance of going up and chatting to someone that you think you've got solid ideas about and that you're happy with your political analysis of what's gone on for them, and actually ask them what their story is.*

For Lou, risk taking is required by a lesbian life. Navigating a lesbian life demands courage and creativity;

> *It's about problem-solving skills. You're driven to do a whole range of things, sometimes whether you like it or not, because you want to resolve the situations that you're in. And you're often taking risks to find out how you might do that. That was one of the things that attracted me to lesbians. I just found that really, really attractive.*

Kym and Lee also recommend choosing risk and adventure as a pathway to wellbeing;

> *Be willing to experience different things, not feeling like, 'Oh, I couldn't do that, I couldn't do that,' you know; thinking, 'Well, wait a minute: what would happen if I tried?' and it works, you know. Do it that way instead.*
>
> *I guess it's a bit morbid to think it might be the last day of your life, but it's also a good way to think: 'Well, if I don't try this, how will I ever know?' Going abseiling and climbing through trees and boogie boarding. All that kind of stuff. Like, I never played tennis before, I play tennis once a week; we boogie board all through the summer, as much as we can fit in; I do lots and lots of bushwalking ... So I think, just get out there and try. Some things I wasn't as good at, but I kept trying, and women are willing to encourage you and you just get there.*

Lesley sees the world as offering a myriad of opportunities for discovery. Her tip for thriving is;

Take advantage of every opportunity. That would probably be the most essential thing: if an opportunity presents itself, fit it in and take advantage of it, and if you have to choose between opportunities, choose one. You can't do everything in life and you can't regret it, but just take advantage of things.

What makes it possible to take risks?

Of course risk taking is risky. Lesbians often consider that the rewards outweigh the costs. Kate suggests that the more rewards you get from taking risks, the more inspiration you have for dreaming up further challenges;

I can recommend risk-taking. I would recommend that some of it's more calculated than others, but I still think mostly the benefits far outweigh the deficits. If you can take risks and get over the fear and do things that you think might be exciting, just go ahead and do them. It's not really a trial run. You might as well fit as many things in as you possibly can. Sometimes at the time you think, ' I can't do this,' or, 'It's not going to work.' You have to get over that. Ultimately, when you do those things, the joy that you get from it is immense. It's like building a repertoire. The memories and the pleasure that you have are a source of inspiration.

Nic has some practical advice about how to go about taking risks if you are not used to it;

One way to take a risk is to set a goal and figure out what you need to achieve it. When I went to the Himalayas I didn't know if I could do it. But I noticed that other women at my age had done it and not died and had a good time. I set a big goal and then I know what I need to prepare my body for it, so I did some training and walking around with a heavy pack. Just take one step at a time and don't worry too much about the other steps. It's okay to set big goals, because I can also say, 'It's okay if I don't reach them.' And what I find is that when I set things that I didn't think I really would reach, I did reach, and so the sense of achievement was just enormous. The longest journey begins with the first step. Just stay focused on the steps.

Many things add zest to life

As well as friendship, participating in your community and being adventurous, many other activities contribute to lesbian wellbeing. Exercise and eating well augment thriving. Sports, walking and bike riding are amongst the many vigorous pursuits which are recommended. Resting, reading, yoga and meditation are renewing and nourishing. Pets, having fun and playfulness also make lesbians thrive.

Doing things that you enjoy seems to be a critical ingredient for lesbian wellbeing. Zoy, Rachel and Myrna talked about things they enjoy in life;

My life makes me thrive. Recently, I've been getting into yoga, which I find very helpful, as I'm working full time and studying part time. Yoga is very grounding. Physical exercise is also grounding as it makes you sweat, releases those endorphins and puts everything into perspective. It's also cheaper than counselling. Reading is also great. I love reading.

I do things that I really enjoy, like gardening or bushwalking or having lunch with a group of lesbian women that I enjoy. I'm just really making an effort to get myself out to have fun.

I really enjoy uni, I really like my job, I do voluntary work, I am in a pantomime, and that kind of thing. That gives me a sense of well-being. I find that the other people I do volunteer with are similar to me- their lives are choc-a-block, but they feel lucky to have all that they do, so they give some of their "spare" energy to other people.

Zoy advocates frenetic activity, Tess argues for a mixture and Lena promotes rest and contemplation.

I get a buzz off having a hectic life. I also like to keep active, and go to the gym- it calms me down and puts me in a good mood.

I do a lot of sitting around and just reading or gazing at my garden or just blanking out completely. And I think a good balance between being able to do absolutely nothing and full-on activity is a good way to go.

I find that just so replenishing to have time where I can just relax. I can honestly sit or lie for hours and I'm not actually sleeping or anything, I'm just being completely absorbed by what's going on in my head or around me. If I don't have time to do that regularly, eventually signs of ill health will start to creep in.

There are many sources of strength

When they consider the elements which support them and contribute to wellbeing, some lesbians identify tangible resources like money and housing, some mention intellectual resources such as books and libraries, others identify things they learned from their families. There are widely contrasting views on whether spirituality is a source of strength or a liability.

Tess sees financial security and having a home base as contributing to wellbeing. Marie said;

> *Having a home base, I think it's been really important to me. It's added to my sense of wellbeing and purpose, and for me that's about being able to have space, the luxury of being able to afford space around me. I've got large pets. Having your own home office I reckon is one of the great luxuries of adult life, it's been wonderful, having a whole house to myself. It's a big luxury. I like having things however I like them. Being able to indulge me is a very charming thing, and not buying the package deal of a conventional way to run relationships.*

Passionate pursuits

Being passionately involved and engaged is nourishing for lesbians. Kara tells us;

> *Passion's really important; it's great to have physical passion, but it's great to be passionate about things, and to be passionate about something that you love to do, or have about you, or engaging with others is a great thing. You have to have that in your life.*

Many different pursuits can provide that passion and satisfaction. Work can be enriching and fulfilling, especially if your workplace provides a positive environment for lesbians. Studying can be very satisfying. Creativity, making music and singing also provide great nourishment and help lesbians to thrive.

Work can be a source of great satisfaction for lesbians. Some aspects increase the chances that work will provide nourishment in addition to income. If the work itself feels worthwhile, if there are other lesbians or supportive people in the workplace and if the work provides insight into other peoples lives and stimulates reflection and insight into your own life.

My job is setting up the structures whereby women empower themselves and take charge of their lives. What better work can you have than that?

I work in a job where I get to meet a lot of different same-sex-attracted, transgender, queer people ... what I've realised is that the gift this job has given to me is that it just expanded my life in a way that I could not have imagined.

There are lesbians in my office at work and they make work fantastic. There's just this stuff where you can just be yourself, and if you're talking about sex or you're talking about discrimination or you're talking about patriarchy or whatever, generally they have an understanding of what it means to be discriminated against. That's worded in a roundabout way, but I certainly think that lesbians are an amazing support.

Working is such a good thing for lesbians that it might be a good idea to do some forward planning. Trudy has this advice;

Having a job that you can be passionate about and gives you pleasure is a real triumph. So think about that earlier on in life, like, 'What is going to give me pleasure and access to disposable income?'

Study also supports wellbeing. Tish gets particular glee from having the opportunity to study now that she has created a lesbian life for herself.

Since I commenced full-time university study, I've learnt heaps and heaps and heaps. That's probably been one of the prime positive factors in my life. As an unmarried lesbian woman, now I can do what I want. I wanted to become educated and now I can, and I don't have to think about whether or not I'm pleasing my partner, you know, because it's not like that now. It's a very different relationship with a woman than there is with a husband, very different.

Envision lesbian possibilities

To imagine what a nourishing life as a lesbian might be like, can be a way forward toward wellbeing. This might come through the revelation of meeting someone who is clearly thriving as a lesbian, or through the wise counsel of more experienced friends or mentors. Several women greatly appreciated lesbian mentors or 'godmothers' who helped them understand that it is possible to flourish as a lesbian and told them about their community and its history. Others were regretful that no one had told them that a lesbian life was possible sooner. Carla vividly remembered meeting a woman and finding out later that she was a lesbian;

> *That kind of shocked me because she was so different to the other women that I'd met. It was like this enlightenment for me. If this woman, can identify as lesbian and is a lesbian, I want to be like her. And it was very, very powerful for me at that time to think 'I'm okay now, I can do this. I can process this into my life and be okay with it. I don't think she'll ever know the profound effect that she actually had on me.'*

Books and libraries with lesbian collections often provide affirmation. Lesbian music and stories are a wonderful tonic in comparison to 'being surrounded by heterosexual everything.' Ayah said; 'Sitting down and reading a Claire McNab junk novel is much nicer than reading a Mills and Boon because there's parts of myself reflected there.' Lesbians might find their own experiences mirrored in a book, or they might find answers to questions they were asking about how to proceed with a lesbian life.

> *I think the good thing about books was like sampling a whole range of things and finding out, 'Well, which one do I have an affinity for?' I remember avidly reading a whole range of things, thinking, 'Mm, no, I'm not that interested in that', putting that down, picking up something else that was, you know, interesting. It was really in some respects an emotionally economical way of finding out things. Whilst it's great to get to talk to other women, when you still are trying to explore those things you don't always want to have an exploratory conversation.*

Seeing and hearing from each other in the media

While seeing our lives depicted on television might be affirming, some found the images in these scripts bizarre. Marg couldn't identify with any of The L Word, it was just so far removed from her reality. She said 'I think we need to be more visible as ordinary women.' Others are delighted whenever they hear of other lesbians through mainstream or gay media.

Things I gleaned from my biological family

Some lesbians learn to assert their rights from an early age. Those who were encouraged to think for themselves and to engage in discussion and debate appreciated what they had learned. Kaz picked up some very useful skills at home;

I was raised in a pretty progressive, hippie family. They were activists and my parents actually hired lots of lesbians in their business, so I had lots of exposure to lesbians, strong women, early on. So that was I think pretty useful. So I think I had less of that internalised stuff than lots of other women just because I'd seen good, strong women out there before. And because my mum had lots of lesbian friends it was like; Oh, I've seen them round and I know they're happy women. And just because my parents were activists as well, mostly in environmental stuff, it meant that I had access to knowing that that's a way of doing things. So when I moved here I just really found that the lesbians tended to hang out in places where social change was going on. Because I had that background myself it was pretty easy to meet lesbians.

Marie told us that growing up in an all male household and learning to assert herself there had ensured that she knew she had a set of rights from a very early age. Ayla also learned early on to stick up for herself;

I experienced quite a bit of racism in primary school... I probably was one of the first Turkish kids in the area, and that was very difficult. But certainly I'm very proud of the fact I've lived in a Muslim-Catholic household. I got the positives of both religions and that was all the big Christmas and the Ramadan and the good food, and I got lots of diversity from that, which I was very fortunate for. I'm very lucky that my family are really quite progressive, so they're very supportive of my lesbianism.

Marg attributed her sense of humor to her family;

I think a sense of humour I definitely got from both of my parents, probably a bit of a black sense of humour from my father. He was Irish, and I think I got from him that being able to twist things. To be quick-witted is a very good skill to get you out of and into things. I think having a sense of humour is very important, because that enables you to do things that are sometimes risky. It's a double-edged sword, often, that sort of humour, but you can get by things in a way that sometimes there's no other way to go through it.

Maeve learned valuable lessons while struggling against her family, a strong sense of self. This inheritance now contributes to her adult wellbeing as a lesbian.

I was not that pliable as a kid and it was very hard to put a dress on me and keep it on me. But it was a very good teaching tool for me, to have that opportunity to make the challenge of people that are close to you and the people that have the most power over you. And so I guess now it probably does make things a little bit easier for me... to go, 'No, you can't do that to me.'

Spirituality

Some women who leave the church they were brought up in still see value in what they learned. Values they consider relevant and useful in a lesbian life include; treating people the way you would like to be treated, never giving up on people, having a sense of social justice, treating people fairly, rebelling against injustice, encouraging difference, being aware that you are part of a community and reaching out to other people.

I haven't time for the Catholic Church, however, looking back, part of what's amazing about my family is that part of their values is that you never give up on people. So I had quite a political upbringing, even though I didn't know it was a political upbringing until I started to be political as a lesbian. And then I suddenly went, 'Oh, yeah. My mum and dad used to say things like that.' So once I started to get more humble about that, I then came right back to my family. Not that they ever gave up on me, but I certainly gave up on them for a while.

I grew up as a Christian Scientist, and because that was mainly run by women, I actually found that a good background to have because it was very liberating. Now that I'm reading Buddhism and other things and all the New Age stuff, that's really what I got in Sunday School. So in fact I had a type of Christianity that had a lot of positive stuff in it and was absolutely liberating in terms of giving you practical ways of dealing with fear, there was no context of sin or punishment, that's completely rejected.

When considering what spirituality contributes to wellbeing, there are widely varied reactions. Some have spiritual beliefs which nourish them, others reject spirituality completely and several argue that organised religion is a health hazard for lesbians.

There are many different explanations of how spiritual beliefs contribute to lesbian wellbeing. Kate believes that there is something greater than herself and feels a spiritual bond with other people who struggle for social change;

It is a sense of connectedness maybe to the earth or to other women and to people who are pushing for social change, or even minorities or people who are generally oppressed, that sort of thing. I don't know if 'spirituality' is the word, but it comes out as some feeling of connection to all that political action. I think there's a kind of spirituality in the lesbian community. There's a lot of honouring of women's bodies as a really important, special thing, and that that's almost spiritual sometimes. Just making sure we look after our own bodies and each other's bodies and being quite reverent about it.

Lesley and Kip described their sense of purpose and destiny as spiritual;

I certainly feel very spiritual in the sense of I think I'm going to do big things and very good things, and to be a pioneer and to change people's lives and inspire people... I certainly have a very strong connection with why I'm here.

I feel like there is a journey I'm on. And my aim is to attain enlightenment in my lifetime, so I'm working on it, you know. It's that sort of like extending yourself in the area that is really important to you, extending yourself just as far as you can. And that also for me is a thriving a thing.

Some practice contemplation or meditation. Shada makes contact with the power of nature by gardening. She told us;

My spirituality is linked to the earth and the power of life that it gives. So if I get depressed, or anything like that, or down, I find if I get out in the garden and get my hands in the dirt and just start feeling part of what the world's all about again, then that makes an enormous difference to how I feel, how I react to other people. It is a very strong, very powerful force. It always has been, ever since I was knee-high to a grasshopper. And again that's through my grandmother and my great-aunt. Love of nature and teaching me about what foods to eat in the bush and how, instead of viewing it as an enemy, viewing it as part of our family that you can rely on and take solace from.

Believe in yourself

Liking yourself and self esteem are very important ingredients for thriving. Believing in yourself can be a springboard for deciding to look after yourself, not allowing other people to put you down, seeking out settings where you will feel comfortable, avoiding situations which are destructive and being willing to take risks.

While many agree that self esteem is required to thrive, there are a variety of views on where self esteem comes from. Tish sees self acceptance as an intrinsic quality;

> *I am someone who is generally very enthusiastic about things. I'm comfortable with myself. I went through a phase when I was 17-18 where I had a bit of an identity crisis, and before that I really hated my appearance, and as a young teenager I felt like my friends didn't really understand me, but now I feel that I know who I am, and what kind of person I want to be, and am enthusiastic to achieve my goals...The first thing I had to do was work out who I am.*

Mel considers that building self acceptance is part of her journey;

> *I've got to a place of just being really pleased with who I am in the world, and that improves many things. One of the key things is that I'm really pleased that I'm a lesbian. I wouldn't want to be anything else. It's absolutely what makes sense for me. There've been many trials and tribulations to get to that point, but I've been there for several years now and I really like it.*

Lesbians speculate about what it is in their lives that promotes self esteem. Sarah thinks that having financial support, being in a long term relationship and getting good marks at university all support her sense of self worth. Some believe that intelligence, or features of their personality such as self reliance, being organised or being optimistic support their wellbeing.

Lesbians advise each other to 'believe in yourself.' This standpoint allows them to feel less diminished by negativity from other people. They are able to say things like 'I believe in myself and there's nothing wrong with me for being gay.'

Jean puts it this way;

I'm just comfortable in myself. I know that this is who I am and people can take it or leave it, and sometimes they leave it and sometimes they take it. I think, 'Well, you know, you can't like everybody and everybody can't like you, so just take what you can get and you'll be right.' That's good, it's a good life.

And Trish said;

Just be honest with yourself and other women and other people, and if you want something just always back yourself, always believe in yourself that you can do it. Just don't hesitate, just go ahead and do it, you know, if it feels right for you.

For these women, the processes of knowing who you really are, being comfortable with who you really are and being honest with other people about who you really are, are intertwined.

Hold yourself in high esteem

A positive view of yourself is the basis for believing that you deserve to thrive. Sara feels she has been able to make a good go of life and understand what makes her feel OK by talking about it with lots of people. Laura told us she has researched the question of how she can live well as a lesbian;

It's about knowing yourself and knowing what it is that makes you feel well. Whether it is going out and having lots of fun, or recognition from others, or some level of success. Whatever it is, know it for yourself and then go and find it. Go and make it happen. Be true to yourself. Find that personal knowledge.

Renae sees discovering the things that make you thrive as a product of self knowledge:

To thrive as a lesbian is about finding your place, what is comfortable for you. I did that by observing lots of people, exposing myself to lots of different environments and different groups of people, to find out the amount of diversity there is across the community. What could loosely be termed as 'how lesbians are living.' It's okay to be who I am, who I essentially am. And I think that's the most important thing, to thrive as a person and as a lesbian.

Where does self esteem come from anyway?

Several women identify the importance of self esteem as an ingredient of wellbeing and speculate about how they attain it. They have difficulty pin pointing what it was in their childhood experiences which generated their sense of self worth. Janet received unconditional support;

My mother didn't actually manage ever to say, 'If you're gay it'll be okay,' because I don't think it was on her radar; but she said, 'If you don't have some great job it'll be okay, if you marry somebody that we don't really approve of that's okay, if you end up pregnant when you're a teenager it'll be okay. As long as you feel happy yourself it'll be okay' I've very much always felt that they would support me, no matter what. And they also brought me up to be quite self-confident and believe in myself, I think that helps.

Zoy told us that many parents are homophobic and unsupportive, yet somehow lesbians develop self esteem anyway;

We were talking about this the other day, and we all agreed that all of our parents were horrible! They were hugely critical. But somewhere in that interaction, in amongst it all, we all came out feeling - like you just automatically start from the premise that people are going to like you. So wherever that sense of 'I'm okay, I'm right, I'm always right until you can prove that I'm wrong, it must have come from family in some way or other. I don't know how it happened. I guess all of us did have one thing in common: all our families had a very strong sense of history and we all had a very strong sense of where we belong in the food chain, so to speak, so maybe that helps.

Kate thinks she developed her sense of self in the process of differentiating herself from her family;

My father, knowing he's there, that's a really nice thing to know. Of course there's other negative things, but in some ways, though, thinking of the negative things, how I've dealt with them and how I've come a long way to work through those issues, that has inadvertently or advertently contributed to my sense of wellness and being a happy person. I'm dealing with those issues and undoing some not-so-happy things and discovering myself as an adult and as separate apart from my family. That has really helped me. So if it hadn't been some yucky bits, the good bits wouldn't be here now. It's really contributed to my sense of happiness and who I am, significantly probably.

Decide to look after yourself

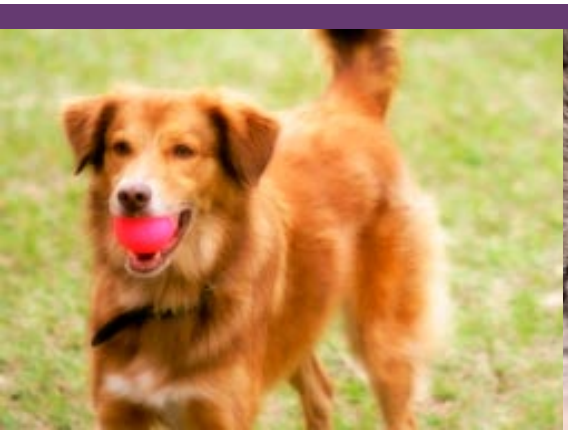
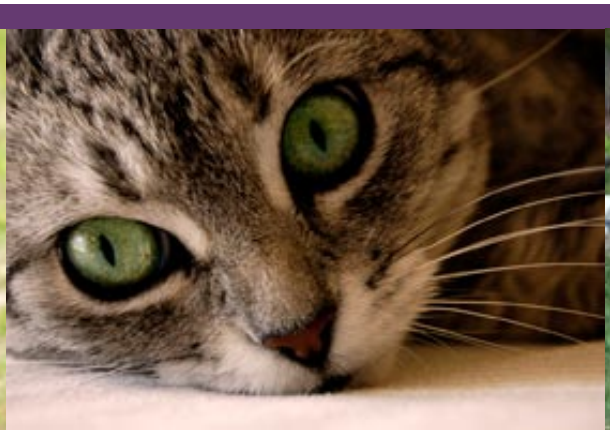
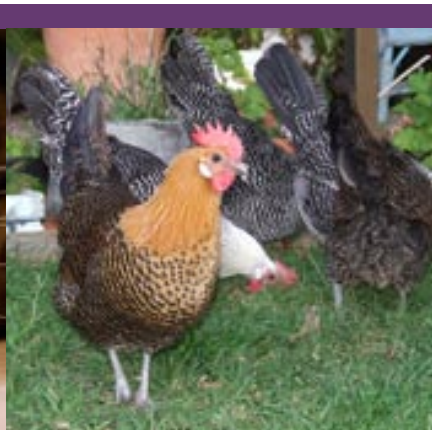
When you believe that you are valuable, taking action to care for yourself makes sense. Lesbians tell stories about steps they take to care for themselves. These include deciding not to damage themselves with alcohol, learning how to deal with life by engaging in therapy and seeking out the resources needed to have a good life. Several see dealing with their mental health as necessary work and Kym advises other lesbians to 'Face your problems, deal with it, do the hard work and the end product will be much better.' Zoy says 'do a bit of therapy and get some clarity ... Make some rational and healthy decisions for yourself so that you are around in twenty years' time to keep thriving, because otherwise you might not be.'

Tish told us about getting off the grog;

I look after myself. I used to be a very heavy drinker. It was about numbing and surviving until I got to this good place that I am. I don't have any regrets about being a drunk because it kept me safe for that time. It numbed lots of those things out, and gave me courage to think that I could go on in a lesbian community. Lots of us were heavy drinkers in those days, too, so there was a sense of camaraderie, being on the grog. We were completely fearless. We numbed our sense that we were vulnerable. But anyway, it wasn't doing my body any good and in the end it wasn't doing my head any good. So I've looked after my physical health very particularly. Because I feel really good in my body and I like how my body moves through the world, that helps me feel good about myself.

And Marie also gives advice about looking after yourself;

Do the work. Whether that's counselling, or acupuncture, or jogging on the beach every day, or writing. I found the more and more I do that, the more and more I thrive. And I have a view that it will just continue to get better and better. That is an amazing place to come to after being in a place where I just thought it was just going to get worse and worse. It's an ongoing journey, not living in the past, letting things go and not letting things that happened twenty years ago run your life today. I think it's probably about being comfortable with who you are. And that the lesbian bit with you is okay, too. Don't spend a lot of time worrying about what other people think of you or say of you, because you actually can't change any of that. You might as well worry about what you can change and do things for yourself, and for your friends.

Healthcare Providers Can be Helpful

Therapists and counsellors can assist with mental health issues. Grace had a good experience with a counselor who provided a short series of sessions and then said 'I think we've run out of things to talk about, come back if you need me again but I think you're okay to take off.' Two lesbians told us they were very grateful to counselors who told them 'You're not alone, and there's all this literature and all this stuff that tells you that, not only are you not alone, but you're not alone coming out in your forties.'

Maeve told us how her friends saved her life by paying for an appointment with a psychologist;

I had a really depressive episode. Planned my funeral and written my letters, decided how I was going to do it. I'd just had enough and I didn't give a shit about the thing that I was supposed to do, I just didn't care any more, and a couple of my good friends they said, 'We're going to send you off,' and I said, 'I'm not going, I've had enough.' And as I walked out of their house they'd written a cheque out for two sessions with the psychologist, so I went and made an appointment to see her. That was my last resort.

She spent about three hours with me. At the start of the session she said, 'I'm not letting you walk out of here if I think you walked out of here and you were going to harm yourself.' We spent about three hours really workshopping a whole stack of stuff, doing some really hard work, and I walked out of there feeling like I wasn't going to do anything right then and there.

I got through that. And every single time since then where I've felt depressed I've always just gone, 'Remember that situation? You got through that. If you can get through that, you can get through anything.' And I've never ever felt that again. That experience reinforced my belief in my purpose for being here.

Lesbians appreciate practitioners who they feel comfortable with, who make it their business to find out more about lesbian health concerns, those who are friendly towards lesbians, and those who ask inclusive questions rather than making lesbianism invisible during the consultation. Alicia is glad that her GP will challenge her; 'she's been really good in saying, 'I don't think you should go that way, have you thought about this?' Or 'If you want to go that way I'll give you a hand, but think about this.' Deb says;

I have a GP who is worth her weight in salt, but it's sort of tit for tat. She's been delightful for me with my disability. We're friends and I'm the consultant for lesbian gays in her practice. But our friendship includes the fact that I am a lesbian and she treats us as a partnership and always has. She considers me, or the lesbian aspects of my health, as though they were normal; and when she looks up research and stuff she always says, 'Well, you know, there's not anyone who's ever said that they were lesbian or gay in the research, and therefore this is the heterosexual finding, and how does that relate to you?' So I suppose over time that's been very helpful to me.

Mel is happy to travel 45 minutes to see her dentist because 'she's perfectly happy about who we are and she always asks about my partner.' Kip chose a doctor to look after her high blood pressure who is 'a bit outside the square and asks different questions and approaches things differently. Kym sees two doctors, a female GP for emotional stuff and a gay guy for physical ailments.

Finding a good provider

Often referrals come from other lesbians, from women's health services, from the queer press, or through queer events that are focused on health. After a bad experience with therapy Liz obtained a list from a women's health referral network and interviewed twenty psychologists until she found one who she felt comfortable with. Lesbians who provide referrals to lesbian friendly practitioners as part of their work make it their business to locate suitable practitioners.

Linda finds self help organisations to be a good resource;

> *There's an organisation that deals with my disability. Not that I would use it as a first port of call, but, for example, I got a really good travel agent out of it, and I got a really, really good sports physiotherapist. Twice a year they have open days. They have surgeons and alternative practitioners and tai chi. So I'd go lesbian referral first, then a self-help organisation.*

How to get the best care

Lesbians have found out how to get the best possible health care. Some use contacts within their networks to obtain information and to ask questions about health care that is been recommended to them. Trina always checks with her lesbian pharmacist friend before she takes any new medicines.

Preparing a list of questions before a consultation is recommended. Lou describes this method;

> *We would brainstorm a list of questions before we went in to see the specialists or went to see the palliative team. So we had all of our questions ready and then we'd dutifully work our way through them. And people that took the time to answer the questions and work through them always scored better, even if they were rude and horrible. So that's a piece of advice. Think about it first and have a set of questions.*

Trish has seen a lot of specialists and has worked out some sophisticated strategies for getting good information from them. She makes make a list of questions for her specialist, checks them with her trusted GP, and reports back their answers to her GP. She says;

> *I suppose the long and the short of it is that you just have to ask lots of questions and be really upfront. A few times I've just postponed appointments until I can get enough information. I just said, 'I'll come back when you've done the homework and I've done the homework and we can jointly make a decision.' When I've come back a week or a month later, then they have often changed their mind, because they've actually got time to do some more research.*

When I started seeing specialists I had to learn a lingo that would work for them. I used to say, 'there may be three options here: give me between fifty and a hundred per cent as the likely probability of you thinking that each option would work.' And then I would ask 'If you were in my shoes, which one would you pick?'

I found a lot of doctors wouldn't answer the second question, but those who would gave me extra information above and beyond all the research we had done. When I asked them to put themselves in my position, it seemed to help them pass on information and participate in the decision-making exercise with me. And that's a much better way of a making a decision.

Resist denigration

Some women perceive a background level of misogyny in Australian society which is not nourishing for any woman, and many lesbians identify homophobia as detracting from their wellbeing. Understanding that homophobia is not your fault is important for retrieving self esteem. Annette and Kaz explain how homophobia can make you feel bad about yourself;

> *Me and my partner were walking down the street at night and someone yelled out something derogatory about lesbians. Her automatic reaction was like, 'Oh, that bastard can go and get fucked because it means nothing to me,' whereas I took it on more and went, 'Oh my God, what if there IS something wrong with us?' I just wish that that didn't happen and that someone had been able to tell me early enough that no matter what anyone else says it's perfectly okay to be a lesbian.*
>
> *I think understanding the impact of homophobia is really important. I think if you don't actually understand it, it affects you from the inside and you think what you're feeling is your fault. It's really important to understand that there's this huge cultural problem, that affects our lives, and it affects us from the inside out... I wish I'd understood how that would affect me on the inside and I'd had some strategies for how to deal with that when I was younger, instead of punishing and excluding myself from social things.*

Lee told us;

> *For a long time I thought that I was perverted. And then I really realised that, hey, it's okay, I'm okay. So I'm not saying that I had low self-esteem or that I was unsure of myself; I just felt that there was something wrong during those years.*

In confronting homophobia, lesbians find the support of friends most important. Supportive family members are also mentioned, although families have also been a source of abuse. Rachael's life improved after she left her birth family behind;

> *I think not putting up with all the homophobic crap was positive. I stopped having anything to do with my family, I guess I became comfortable with being a lesbian. When I started having some therapy the possibility of not having my life lived for me by other people just became so overwhelmingly attractive that walking away from it and being allowed to be who I was, just changed things.*

A number of lesbians advocate leaving unsupportive relationships. Kaz feels that the steps she took to leave undermining relationships behind have allowed her to form new relationships and move on to a better life;

I don't associate with my family. This was eventually a positive thing for me, as first, it allowed me to heal from my abuse, and second, it made me focus on myself and also on connecting with people who became my family in their absence. I think if I hadn't had to disconnect from my family, I might not have had the chance to explore my good life and to meet people from whom I could learn a lot.

Ellen would rather be on her own than put up with a destructive relationship;

One of the things I think is important, when you're in a relationship and if it doesn't work out, don't look at it as rejection. I just look at it as, 'Well, they're not the right person for me.' I don't think it's important to necessarily be in a relationship ... I'm the sort of person I'd rather be on my own than be in a relationship that wasn't right ..... being a single lesbian is a lot easier than being a single heterosexual woman, a lot easier.

Where do we get the strength to resist?

Trina sounded a warning that the supports which helped her to resist denigration as younger woman are now being eroded. Several lesbians told us how much energy it takes to confront homophobia and others reflected on where they get the strength for resistance. Maeve thought that resistance might be innate, Ayla suggested that strength grows through overcoming adversity or from knowing you are loved. Nina said she gathers her strength amongst other lesbians;

When I go into things like my TAFE course I'm not even out, because it's just not worth the effort. At uni I spent a lot of my energy fighting with the institution about the fact that lesbians were treated appallingly and represented appallingly, and that they allowed homophobia. The energy that I get from lesbian community groups then allows me to go out into other forums to do some political activism or change or be vocal and out as a lesbian.

Lynn recommends self protection and only putting out as much energy as you can afford;

If I hear an adverse comment about homosexuality or something, I'll either take them to task about it or I'll go, 'Okay, well, that's all right.' I don't let it drag me down, do you know what I mean? I just put it aside. I know that there are people out there that don't think the way I think, and that's okay. If I can, I educate them, but if I don't have the time, or I don't feel strong enough, I don't let it get me down.

Cara suggests that learning from history is a way to confront future struggles.

I think you've got to acknowledge your ancestors, it's so important to do that. I don't think you can have a thriving future if you don't remember what the past was like, otherwise you take it for granted and you don't thrive. We shouldn't be made to feel lucky for what we've got, because what we've got now is still not enough. The luxuries that we have now should have always been normal. You've got to celebrate your successes to keep going forward. Even the little rewards you've got to celebrate, otherwise you can't keep fighting and there's still heaps more battles, there are a heap more battles to win.

Jill uses reframing to develop a positive spin on her circumstances

When something happens and I think 'this sucks, I wish I was straight', I just think about the positives. Like the community that we have, and how we're kinda special and we're more interesting. And the connection we can have with other queer people. And that we have the strength to get through the crap that is thrown our way. Some people have chronic illnesses, some people lose their parents. In the whole scheme of things, it could be a lot worse.

Tess gets strength to take risks from the support of her lover;

Big things that came up in the main question of what makes us thrive. One is having a really supportive partner. I know you can't advise people to do that, but my partner and I have a really good relationship and that makes a massive difference. Like the decision to be out at work. Because I know that I'm supported at home with my partner and I've got the courage to do something like that because I'm in a really loving relationship. So that's a big source of joy.

Come out!

Coming out is one strategy for building self esteem and resisting denigration. Lesbians acknowledge that it can be scary and that coming out takes courage. Families, work colleagues and acquaintances can be surprisingly supportive. Jan describes the rewards of coming out;

> *Being out is important to me in terms of my own sense of wellbeing as a lesbian. I don't like the feeling that I get when I feel like I need to hide that.*

Su says;

> *I feel I've gone through a lot of that coming out process and have been identified as lesbian now for only eleven years really. Through that journey I'm really glad I'm where I am with it now and I really feel very strongly to advocate for lesbian visibility and bisexual visibility. I think it's just great that there is visibility and there's more acceptance. I'd say to women, be out there, show yourself and be proud of yourself and just let that be part of who you are.*

And Kip tells us;

> *My best friend is Indian and she was really glad when I came out, she said, now you understand what it is like to be in a minority. So I can sort of empathise with her.*

Being open is a generous act which will provide affirmation for other lesbians and improve the wellbeing of gay people generally.

> *It did concern me sometimes that I might be recognised when I was performing, but I suppose that is also partly why I do it, because I don't believe I have anything to hide. I believe we need to see the faces of the community, not just the ones they show us when Mardi Gras or pride march is on.*

For Jill, it is an expression of honesty in relationships. In her view;

> *Just by engaging with people you can allow your true self to come out and people can just see you for who you are. Just take your sexuality in your stride as part of who you are.*

Nell and Tish point out that, if you don't come out, you never find out what the people around you think of lesbians.

When I came out to myself I felt comfortable in my own skin for the first time in my life, but when I came out to other people I felt comfortable in society and comfortable in their company, and that really just made all the difference ... The fact that I'm out means that I have support from my family and support from my friends, both straight and gay, and support at work.

I reckon generally if you can afford to then it is worth it. Just because that hiding thing is such hard work and also it means that you never know what kind of people are around you. If you come out and someone freaks out, you think, 'Well, at least I know now, I don't have to keep pretending.' Or people that you don't expect to be friendly are. So I think for the women who can, coming out's really important.

Lee and Cara were happily surprised when they received positive responses to coming out.

I grew up feeling that I was supposed to believe in myself and that they believed in me. That was certainly borne out when I did come out to my parents. The first thing they both said was, after their big look of surprise, was, 'Well, you'll still be you and it doesn't make any difference.' That was their take on life, I'm me regardless of anything and I should always believe in myself. And my parents then expected my brothers and sisters to feel the same way.

I definitely reckon I gained popularity from coming out. One of my bosses thought it was great because his girlfriend is bi and he thought I'd be a good insight, and the other is a teacher at a strict religious school, and he thinks I'm a good example of a gay student who is happy to be themselves. I'd even say it becomes a sort of pride thing, for them. Like 'see what a good organisation we are, with all our diversity amongst our staff.' So that's good for me. Yay, I'm a valued employee without having to even do anything!