

2023 ASSESSMENT OF

ANXIETY

IN A SAMPLE OF **LGBTQ+**
INDIVIDUALS AGED 45+
LIVING IN PUERTO RICO

BY WAVES AHEAD CORP.

As the Director of Mental Health Services at Waves Ahead, **I constantly identify the need to provide psychotherapeutic services for LGBTQ+ older adults.**

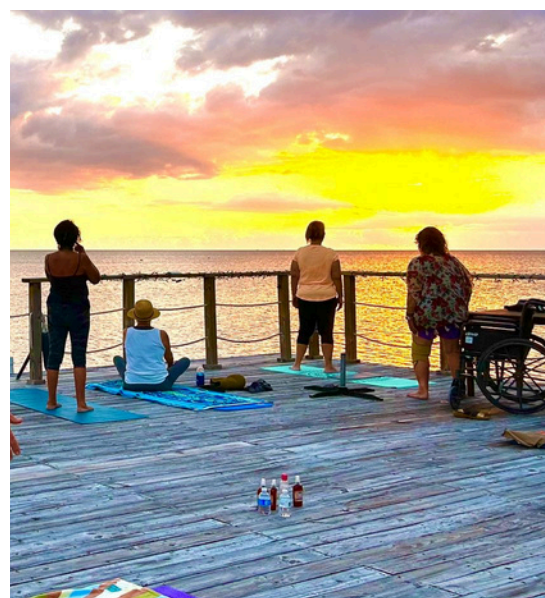
LGBTQ+ older adults require inclusive services that consider social justice, human rights, and broad diversity among sexual orientations and gender identities.

In our Mental Health Program, the Clinical Team receives a significant number of referrals related to anxiety diagnoses. **Many of our participants' present difficulties associated with lack of financial resources, lack of housing, poor psychosocial support social isolation, lack of access to medical services, and difficulties with transportation, among many other issues that impact their daily lives.**

From Waves Ahead's point of view, it is fundamental to provide services from a biopsychosocial approach. In this way, it is possible to address their different needs in the biological, psychological, social, and spiritual areas.

We strive in conducting research each year as a way to learn more about the topics impacting the LGBTQ+ older adults in Puerto Rico.

Older adults have the right to live a dignified life in which they can have a high quality of life and well-being.



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ABOUT US

WAVES AHEAD is dedicated to supporting marginalized and vulnerable sectors of Puerto Rican society by providing aid in their needed areas in order to reestablish and strengthen them.

We manage five LGBTQ+ Community Centers focused on Older Adults. We hold community-based services and advocacy on behalf of the LGBTQ+ Older Adults in Puerto Rico.

Currently, we provide mental health services (individual and group), music therapy, creative art sessions, educational workshops, yoga, mindfulness, and other ancillary services.

- Every month, we provide mental health services to over **293 individuals**;
- And ancillary services such as yoga and meditation, mindfulness, music-therapy, creative therapeutic group, to more than **180 individuals**.

We hold **weekly support groups**

- **Fresas y Chocolate** support group for gay and bisexual men
- **RaMaDaSa** support group focused on transgender and non-binary individuals

Other programs:

Descúbrete: Business entrepreneurship & cooperative for diverse populations in PR.

Empóderate: A public policy focused program in advocating for LGBTQ+ inclusive laws, protocols, and guidelines to better the lives of the LGBTQ+ community in Puerto Rico, holding leaderships academies each year.

Resiliency - Reconstruye Q: Provides necessities during emergencies. In addition, we provide mental health first aid and short-term mental health sessions during our interventions as well as ongoing food sustainability program.

Forthcoming:

- Soraya's transitional shelter which will include a community center and units of supportive housing in Cabo Rojo, PR.
- A complex of one bedroom apartments focused on older adults in Isabela, PR.



INTRODUCTION

Anxiety is a common and natural human response to stress or perceived threats. According to David Barlow (2022), anxiety is a future-oriented mood state associated with preparation for possible, upcoming negative events; and fear is an alarm response to, real or perceived, present or imminent danger. It can manifest in different forms and intensities, affecting people differently based on their life experiences, genetic predispositions and/or coping mechanisms. Those life experiences are part of a conglomeration called **Social Determinants of Health (SDH)**. The World Health Organization (2019) defines the SDH as the non-medical factors that influence health outcomes; the conditions in which people are born, grow, work, live, and age, and the wider set of forces and systems shaping the conditions of daily life.

It is important to understand the **interconnection between anxiety and the SDH** to better address the mental health disparities within the system and to promote equitable access to mental health services.

Those who are facing socio-economic problems, discrimination, and/or lack of social support may be at a higher risk of developing anxiety disorders or experiencing severe symptoms associated with stress.

Older adults' mental health often deteriorates due to the cumulative impact of their earlier life experiences and the specific stressors associated with aging (World Health Organization, 2023). Some events that affect their mental health and that can cause anxiety are: loss of their loved ones, not being able to do daily activities, losing body mobility, social isolation, economic problems, loss of their independence, **discrimination based on their age (ageism), sexual orientation and/or gender identity**, among others.

Recent studies demonstrated that older adults have high rates of anxiety disorders. Moreover, recent findings confirm that many Puerto Rican older adults suffer from anxiety; it's especially common in individuals living in low socioeconomic status.

At Waves Ahead, it is particularly important to know if these factors affect the LGBTQ+ older adults population in the same way.

What is known is that ageism, combined with discrimination about sexual orientation, has marginalized many older LGBTQ+ individuals and adversely influenced their well-being (as cited in King & Richardson, 2017). In fact, this report is a result of one of many findings contained in the *2022 Mental Health Needs Assessment* (available in wavesahead.org), a study conducted by Waves Ahead.

The results of this study revealed a significant association **between age and anxiety, depression, and/or suicidal thoughts**. Therefore, this report will focus on **anxiety** in the LGBTQ+ community over 45 years of age.

Waves Ahead conducts studies every year, focusing on the LGBTQ+ older adult population in Puerto Rico, to continue strengthening our services and improving the quality of life of our communities.

METHODS

Quantitative Data

During June to August 2023, Waves Ahead collected **quantitative data** throughout the administration of a questionnaire. The Generalized Anxiety Disorder-7 (GAD-7) instrument was used to evaluate anxiety levels. Other sociodemographic data was collected. A total of 253 participants completed the questionnaire.

Qualitative data

A series of 15 interviews were conducted during April 2024. To generate the questions for the interview, the GAD-7 questions were used as a reference, combined with direct questions linked to the population. The inclusion criteria established for the participants were that they have to be

- 45 years or older
- live in Puerto Rico for at least the past six months
- identify as part of the LGBTQ+ Community.

As a student during my time in Waves Ahead, **I have learned to advocate for the mental health of vulnerable and marginalized populations such as LGBTQ+ older adults.** This community has faced a myriad of unique challenges throughout their lives. Among these are discrimination based on sexual orientation, stigmatization, social isolation, and prejudice. These events can aggravate their emotional well-being and above all, exacerbate their states of calm and cause them anxiety. Added to this are concerns about natural processes such as death and aging.

It is essential to ensure that mental health services are not only available but also accessible and tailored to the specific needs of this population; services where they feel safe, supported, accompanied, and listened to. Also, it is paramount that mental health professionals are trained on LGBTQ+ issues.

Promoting accessibility to these services is more than a health issue; it is a matter of dignity and justice.

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Aging is a natural process where every twist and turn brings forth new discoveries about ourselves and the world around us. It's not just a biological journey; it's rich in unique experiences, lifestyle choices, social connections, access to resources, socioeconomic status, and living conditions, among many other influential factors.

For LGBTQ+ individuals, this journey often takes on additional challenges. LGBTQ+ older adults have lived a long history of discrimination, social stigma, and marginalization. Even today, despite all the progress achieved, many challenges persist. **Sexual orientation and gender identity continue to be important factors influencing people's health.** These long-lived experiences often result in a greater likelihood of developing physical and mental illnesses, such as the one we discuss in this report: **Anxiety.**

One of our top priorities is to address mental health issues in LGBTQ+ older adults. At Waves Ahead, we are committed to supporting the LGBTQ+ community in Puerto Rico and looking for new ways to do so.

We will continue to strive to create safe and supportive spaces that meet the needs of LGBTQ+ older adults in Puerto Rico!

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RESULTS

The results of this report are based on both the questionnaire and interview. The results presented in this report, focus on individuals who are 45 years or older, identify as part of the LGBTQ+ community, and are residents of Puerto Rico.

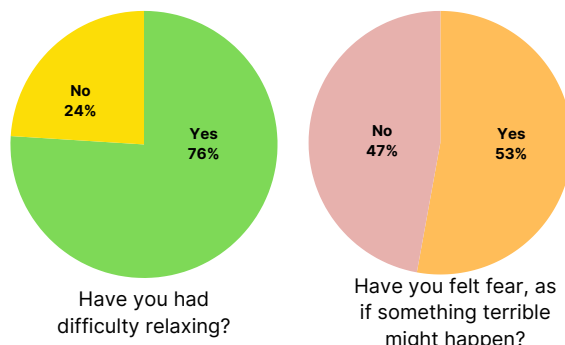
When analyzing the responses to the GAD-7 questionnaire administered during **June-August 2023**, it was found that the majority of participants experienced manifestations of anxiety.

In each GAD-7 question, **more than fifty percent of participants responded affirmatively to feeling anxious or nervous, having persistent worries, difficulty relaxing, restlessness, easy irritability, and fear that something bad might happen.**

In this research, we found that the most common way anxiety showed up was by having **difficulty relaxing**. About 76% of those who participated in the study said they had trouble relaxing. On the other hand, the least common manifestation among participants was the **fear that something terrible might happen**;

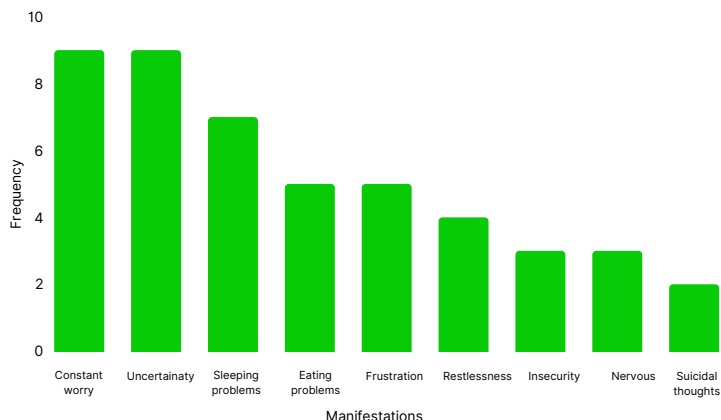
about 53% of participants mentioned having felt this type of fear. All of the other questions in the GAD-7 were positive between the range of 62% to 73%.

Anxiety Manifestations based on the GAD-7



Equivalently, when the people interviewed were asked to explain what anxiety is or what it feels like when they experience it, the most frequent manifestations mentioned were:

- being worried all the time
- uncertainty
- having difficulty sleeping and eating
- feeling frustrated, restless, insecure, nervous, and/or having suicidal thoughts

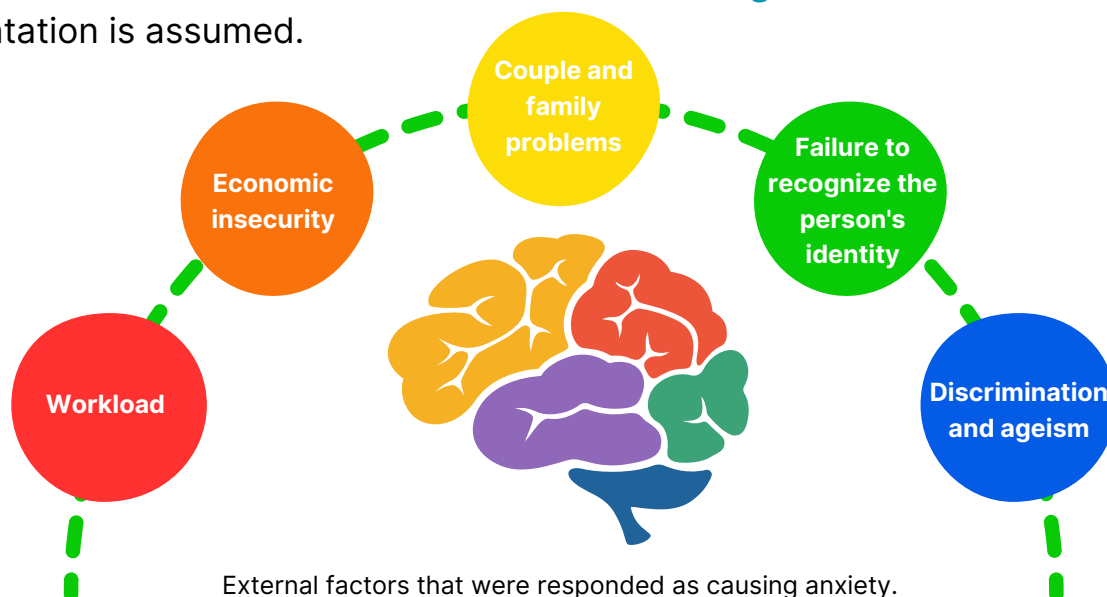


Respondents identified seven major factors that cause anxiety. First, they said that they were most concerned about their **workload**, followed closely by **economic insecurity**. They also mentioned **couple and family problems, discrimination, feeling that their identity is not valid** and, finally, the **age** factor.

This fosters feelings of insecurity and uncertainty among LGBTQ+ individuals seeking healthcare, also exacerbating their anxiety levels. As a result, to avoid mistreatment or bad experiences, LGBTQ+ individuals refrain from accessing healthcare services, thus compromising their health status.

On the other hand, in order to investigate how social structures affect a person and cause anxiety, participants were asked if they had found any public or private system that should change the way it treats LGBTQ+ people so that they feel less anxious about going to these offices to seek services. **Almost in unison respondents ranked the religious system first.** Consequently, they identified experiences when receiving **health services**, where their identity has been questioned and/or invalidated and their sexual orientation is assumed.

In terms of the political system, the failure to enforce laws safeguarding this community instills a profound sense of insecurity and anxiety. Insufficient legal protection or the looming possibility of abolishing existing laws shielding this community can lead to scenarios marked by discrimination, exclusion, and restricted access to fundamental services. **The absence of legal assurances or societal and institutional recognition and respect can evoke fear, insecurity, and persistent concerns about their well-being.**



Despite all, participants also identified activities and behaviors that have helped them reduce their anxiety. Among these are:

- listening to music
- seeking professional help
- physical activity
- relaxation and breathing exercises
- companionship of their animals
- nature walks/activities
- socialize with others
- attend workshops or educational activities
- improving their diet



main findings

- Within the LGBTQ+ older adult community, **there exists a prevalent confusion regarding the distinction between the concept of anxiety and the formal diagnoses of anxiety disorders.**
- Occasionally, participants used "anxiety" interchangeably with "depression," highlighting confusion between the two terms and their respective manifestations.
- Participants suggested that **the genesis of their anxiety stemmed from past traumatic experiences associated with their sexual orientation.**
- **Economic insecurity** was recognized as a significant factor exacerbating individuals' anxiety levels.
- Concerns persist regarding the availability of **secure housing for LGBTQ+ older adults**, specifically housing complexes that provide safety and inclusivity. The potential lack of a secure living environment significantly contributes to heightened anxiety among this population.

RECOMENDATIONS

Education

- Programs must be established to educate about LGBTQ+ awareness, not only to healthcare providers but also to the broader society. It is essential to cultivate an understanding of the experiences and needs of the LGBTQ+ older adult population.
- Provide training for managers and staff at housing complexes on issues pertinent to LGBTQ+ older adults to promote inclusiveness, equality, and respect.
- Professionals delivering mental health services should receive training on issues specific to the LGBTQ+ older adult population.

Housing

- Develop programs that offer units to low-income LGBTQ+ older adults and financial aide to them.

Health

- Revise the forms used for collecting medical information to include fields for preferred names, pronouns, and gender identity.
- Conduct audits of health care and mental health facilities to ensure they are capacitated to

provide services to LGBTQ+ older adults.

- Advocate for the establishment of a financial fund to subsidize mental health services for LGBTQ+ older adults that are not covered by their health plans.

Policy

- Advocate for the development and establishment of new public policies at local, state, and federal levels that ensure stable housing and protect LGBTQ+ older adults against discrimination.
- LGBTQ+ older adults should be actively involved in legal processes, including the revision and creation of public policies, to ensure their representation and address their specific needs effectively.

Environment

- Incorporate LGBTQ+ older adults into the planning and leadership of initiatives affecting their community to ensure they feel included and valued.
- Advocate for the development of more inclusive spaces that enable this population to socialize in a safe and welcoming setting.
- Provide workshops and training sessions that enhance economic stability and address the

specific needs of LGBTQ+ older adults in identifying and managing anxiety.

Investigation

- Promote and provide funding for research focused on the needs of LGBTQ+ older adults.
- Incorporate questions about sexual orientation and gender identity into demographic surveys to gather more comprehensive data about this population and their needs.
- Ensure the explicit inclusion of LGBTQ+ older adults in research studies on aging and mental health.
- Advocate for research into the factors impacting the physical and mental health of the LGBTQ+ older adult population.

CONCLUSION

The LGBTQ+ older adult population in Puerto Rico experience significant anxiety, stemming from a confluence of factors such as social inequality, discrimination, economic insecurity, lack of justice and education, as well as barriers to accessing essential services, and pervasive prejudice and stigmatization. It is crucial for health systems, public policy, and community services to adopt focused, evidence-based strategies that are attuned to the needs of

LGBTQ+ older adults. Addressing their mental health is essential to achieving overall population health. Consequently, mental health services must be made accessible, particularly for vulnerable groups, and specifically to LGBTQ+ community. Further research is needed to explore these topics.

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