

# Becoming Myself: Authenticity as a Pathway Toward Well-Being for Sexual Minority Populations

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*In this article, the role of authenticity as a unique psychological strength of sexual minority people is discussed. The current literature suggests that authenticity is a protective factor for sexual minority individuals and, thus, this article aims to highlight the need to study further the psychological correlates of this variable. This article provides a review of the literature examining the role of variables such as internalized heterosexism, spirituality, self-compassion, and psychological flexibility in hindering or facilitating authenticity in sexual minority populations. Future directions and clinical implications for the development of evidence-based treatments for this population are discussed.*

**Keywords:** sexual minority, authenticity, well-being, LGBT+

## Introduction

Research on the mental health of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and additional gender and sexuality diverse (LGBTQ+) people has largely used a deficit model, with a focus on the negative aspects of the LGBTQ+ experience. Studies have shown that sexual and gender minority individuals do face unique stressors related to their minority identity that result in increased rates of mental health concerns such as depression, anxiety, and risk of suicide (Lefevor et al., 2019; Meyer, 2003). At the same time, research also suggests that sexual and gender minority individuals have the ability to transform experiences of discrimination and oppression into resiliency and can, in fact, flourish in the face of minority stress (Szymanski & Gonzalez, 2020). In recent years, studies have emerged that highlight the positive aspects of the LGBTQ+ experience (Riggle et al., 2008; Tebbe et al., 2022). The aim of this essay is to review the current literature on factors that contribute to greater well-being for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and other sexual minority (LGB+) individuals.

Although the existing literature has identified LGB-specific risk factors, such as identity concealment, internalized heterosexism, and other stigma-related stress, as potential targets for mental health interventions (Pachankis, 2018), there is a need to also focus on protective factors that can be nurtured to support LGB+ well-being. The literature on positive LGB+ identity has identified various dimensions that capture the unique strengths that sexual minority

individuals develop as a result of navigating their identity within a heteronormative context, such as authenticity, self-awareness, community belonging, commitment to social justice, and intimacy in romantic relationships (Riggle et al., 2014). Out of these various dimensions, authenticity is most commonly reported by participants when asked what are the “positive things about being [LGB+]” (Riggle et al., 2008, p. 212). Furthermore, authenticity has also consistently been linked to greater psychological well-being among sexual minority individuals (Petrocchi et al., 2020; Rostosky et al., 2018). Therefore, through a review of the literature, this paper aims to capture how the unique experiences of sexual minority individuals make authenticity central to their well-being. In doing so, this review aims to highlight one potential mechanism through which the well-being of sexual minority individuals can be supported, with the hope of contributing to the development of evidence-based treatments that are tailored to address LGB-specific concerns.

To better understand the role of authenticity in the well-being of sexual minority individuals, factors that both hinder and facilitate authenticity in this population need to be considered. For instance, one major barrier to authentic living faced by LGB+ individuals is the stigma associated with diverse sexual identities. In particular, the internalization of such stigma among LGB+ individuals can lead to concealment and shame toward one’s identity, which can consequently lead to lower authenticity and poorer quality of life (Fredrick et al., 2019). On the other hand, prior research suggests that there are factors that can counteract the negative effects of internalized stigma and bolster authenticity among LGB+ individuals, such as having a strong sense of spirituality (Lassiter & Mims, 2022), cultivating compassion (Beard et al., 2017), and having high psychological flexibility (Karakuş & Akbay, 2022).

Although research suggests that general compassion, as conceptualized in compassion-focused therapy, can support LGB+ well-being (Pepping et al., 2017; Petrocchi et al., 2016), this review focuses on self-compassion in particular due to the existing literature examining its association with authenticity. Taken together, this paper examines how the aforementioned factors, namely internalized stigma, spirituality, self-compassion, and psychological flexibility, can influence authenticity and, consequently, the psychological well-being of sexual minority individuals.

## Positive LGB+ Identity

Navigating a heteronormative society as an LGB+ person comes with certain challenges as well as opportunities for growth (Riggle et al., 2014; Szymanski et al., 2017). The literature on positive LGB+ identity was born out of the need to study the strengths and resources that LGB+ individuals develop as a result of their unique circumstances. For instance, developing an LGB+ identity requires one to go through a process of questioning and reflecting on one's sexual orientation, and then choosing to live in accordance with one's "true self." Consequently, LGB+ persons may develop a greater sense of authenticity and self-awareness in this process. Furthermore, within this process, LGB+ persons are likely to experience heterosexist oppression in the form of prejudice and discrimination, which can sensitize them to these issues and increase their commitment to social justice. In order to cope with the experiences of heterosexism, LGB+ persons may also seek support from other members of the community, which can additionally foster a greater sense of belongingness. Finally, within the context of romantic relationships, this sense of connectedness due to shared lived experiences can contribute to greater intimacy among same-sex partners. Thus, based on themes that emerged from qualitative data and subsequent factor analyses, Riggle et al. (2014) determined that authenticity, self-awareness, community, intimacy, and social justice best represent positive LGB+ identity.

Out of the different aspects of positive LGB+ identity, authenticity seems to be particularly salient in this population. In Riggle et al.'s (2008) qualitative study, they found that many LGB+ participants reported feeling a sense of freedom from gender norms, which allowed them to connect with their authentic selves. For instance, one participant from Riggle et al.'s study shared, "I can play (to some extent) by different rules in life (that is, I can be a strong, tough aggressive woman) because I have already broken a major one by being a lesbian" (p. 214). As the quote suggests, society often puts individuals socialized to be "men" and "women" in a box such that it restricts them from truly expressing themselves. However, since being non-heterosexual itself is a "violation" of the norm, LGB+ individuals gain the freedom to be their authentic selves in other aspects of life as well. Another participant from the study shared a similar sentiment, "Our relationship was 'unconventional' to start with, which has given us the opportunity to work on it with a lot of freedom [including] more sexual freedom" (p. 214). Thus, being LGB+ incidentally frees a person from societal expectations, especially as they relate to love, desire, gender, sexuality, and relationships, and allows sexual minority individuals to create their own definition of each of these terms.

The benefit of authentic living for LGB+ individuals has not only been supported by qualitative studies but quantitative studies as well. In a study conducted by Rostosky et al. (2018), the relationship between positive LGB+ identity and eudemonic well-being was examined using correlations and structural equation modeling. The six domains of eudemonic well-being in the study included positive relations with others, autonomy, personal growth, environmental mastery, self-acceptance, and purpose in life. Results indicated that as compared to the other positive identity variables, authenticity had the strongest correlations with all six domains of well-being, with Pearson's  $r$  ranging from .29 to .44. Furthermore, after controlling for the other positive identity variables, authenticity was the only one that accounted for significant variance in all six well-being domains. Similarly, in the study con-

ducted by Petrocchi et al. (2020), they found that while all the positive identity variables significantly correlated with psychological well-being, only authenticity significantly predicted psychological well-being after controlling for the other variables. These findings suggest that, perhaps, the relationship observed between the other positive identity variables and well-being can be explained by authenticity. For instance, it may be the case that self-awareness is positively associated with well-being because it allows individuals to gain greater insight into their genuine selves and, thus, fosters authenticity. Similarly, it may be the case that intimacy in relationships is positively associated with well-being because it allows individuals to be truly vulnerable and authentic with other people. All in all, these results suggest that authenticity can act as a significant pathway toward well-being for many LGB+ individuals.

When discussing authenticity within LGBTQ+ populations, it is important to note that it is different from constructs such as disclosure or concealment of one's identity (Riggle et al., 2017). In other words, being authentic does not equate to coming out to one's friends and family and not hiding one's LGB+ identity from others. While authenticity includes an interpersonal aspect of being honest and genuine with others, it also includes an intrapersonal aspect which is not captured by the other two constructs. In particular, authenticity entails a feeling of comfort and peace with oneself and one's identity such that one is able to be true to oneself and feel aligned with one's values. Thus, an authentic person can look like someone who is true to themselves while also concealing their LGB+ identity to protect their safety and integrity.

The importance of distinguishing between authenticity and identity disclosure is highlighted by Riggle et al.'s (2017) study, in which they found that "outness" predicted higher levels of depressive symptoms, whereas authenticity predicted lower levels of depressive symptoms and stress. The results from this study point toward the need to understand the sociocultural context within which LGB+ individuals exist when studying authenticity. As a community that continues to face stigmatization and discrimination across the globe, LGB+ individuals often have to choose between "living their truth" and protecting themselves from physical and psychological harm (Levitt et al., 2016). Therefore, focusing on authenticity rather than "coming out" may provide greater insight into how to support the well-being of LGB+ individuals (Rostosky et al., 2018).

## Internalized Heterosexism and Authenticity

Considering the psychological benefits of authenticity for LGB+ individuals, it is important to identify factors that can both hinder and facilitate it. Research suggests that internalized heterosexism, also referred to as internalized sexual stigma or internalized homonegativity, may be a factor that can prevent LGB+ individuals from being their authentic selves. According to the minority stress model formulated by Meyer (2003), the unique stressors faced by LGB+ individuals can be distal, as caused by external events, or proximal, as it relates to one's subjective experience of these external events. According to this model, internalized heterosexism is a proximal stressor that refers to the internalization of negative attitudes and beliefs about LGB+ individuals. Furthermore, these negative attitudes and beliefs are not only directed at other LGB+ individuals but can also be directed at oneself. Thus, as expected, internalized heterosexism is linked to negative mental health outcomes among LGB+ individuals (Fredrick et al., 2019; Petrocchi et al., 2020). Research has also found that internalized heterosexism mediates the link between external forms of prejudice and discrimination, referred to as public stigma, and poorer well-being (Fredrick et al., 2019). Since internalized heterosexism relates to the negative internal processes associated with being LGB+, it seems pertinent to examine its association with authenticity.

Research suggests that one of the reasons internalized heterosexism is linked with psychological distress is because of the discrepancy between who one is and who one is expected to be as a result of rigid gender norms (Fredrick et al., 2019; Szymanski &

Carr, 2008). For instance, Szymanski and Carr (2008) examined the relationship between gender role conflict, internalized heterosexism, self-esteem, avoidant coping, and psychological distress in a sample of sexual minority men. The authors found that gender role conflict predicted internalized heterosexism, which predicted lower self-esteem, which in turn predicted psychological distress and avoidant coping. These findings suggest that the reason that sexual minority individuals may have negative attitudes toward their sexual identity, which ultimately impacts their mental health, may be because of their perceived violation of gender roles. It is possible that to minimize gender role conflict, LGB+ individuals with high internalized heterosexism attempt to conform to traditional gender roles, which compromises their sense of authenticity.

The negative association between internalized heterosexism and authenticity among LGB+ individuals has received validation from prior studies (Fredrick et al., 2019; Petrocchi et al., 2020). For instance, Petrocchi et al. (2020) examined the relationship between internalized sexual stigma, positive LGB+ identity, and self-criticism. Results indicated that out of all the positive identity variables, authenticity had the strongest negative correlation with internalized sexual stigma ( $r = -.57$ ). The authors also found that self-criticism was significantly negatively correlated with authenticity and positively correlated with internalized sexual stigma. These findings suggest that, perhaps, internalized sexual stigma causes LGB+ individuals to harshly criticize themselves because of their sexuality, which causes feelings of shame, and ultimately makes it difficult for them to be authentic. Another study that looked at the relationship between stigma and authenticity was conducted by Fredrick et al. (2019), in which they examined whether authenticity mediated the relationship between internalized sexual stigma and quality of life. The results validated the hypothesized model such that lower internalized stigma was associated with greater authenticity and greater authenticity was associated with greater psychological, social/relational, and environmental quality of life. Furthermore, while authenticity was inversely related to internalized stigma, contrary to the authors' hypothesis, it had a positive relationship with public stigma. The authors suggest that it is possible that the experience of facing external forms of stigma and prejudice requires LGB+ individuals to engage in a meaning-making process that allows them to reaffirm their identities. This explanation supports the research on positive LGB+ identity which suggests that authenticity is a strength that is unique to the LGB+ experience. However, it is important to note that while public stigma may predict greater authenticity, the internalization of the public stigma can be harmful and can have the opposite effect, such that it makes it difficult for LGB+ individuals to accept their identities.

### Spirituality and Authenticity

A potential source of support for LGB+ individuals as they navigate both distal and proximal stressors such as prejudice, discrimination, and internalized heterosexism is spirituality. While there exist multiple conceptualizations of spirituality in the literature, the most general definition of the construct is in terms of a connection with a transcendent or divine entity (Rosenkrantz et al., 2016). In the LGBTQ+ literature particularly, spirituality is also conceptualized as a boundaryless and fluid "union of masculine and feminine energy" (Lassiter & Mims, 2022, p. 3079).

While spirituality and religion are closely interconnected, it is important to distinguish between the two constructs, as they have distinct relationships with well-being among LGBTQ+ individuals. Religion, which emphasizes institutional beliefs and norms, can often be used as a weapon to propagate heterosexist views that can be harmful to the LGBTQ+ community (Lassiter et al., 2023). Consequently, LGB+ individuals often face rejection from religious family and community members, which, when combined with the internal conflict between one's religious beliefs and one's lived experiences, can lead to negative mental health outcomes

such as depression, trauma, and even suicidality (Rosenkrantz et al., 2016). On the other hand, spirituality, which simply emphasizes the connection with the sacred, allows individuals to access feelings of unconditional love and acceptance. Thus, spirituality is associated with positive mental health outcomes among LGB+ individuals, such as lower levels of depression, higher self-esteem, and greater purpose in life (Lassiter et al., 2023).

The benefits of spirituality for LGB+ individuals have been examined in the form of both qualitative (Lassiter & Mims, 2022; Rosenkrantz et al., 2016) and quantitative studies (Lassiter et al., 2023). For instance, Rosenkrantz et al. (2016) asked 314 adults who identified as both LGBTQ+ and spiritual/religious to describe the positive aspects of their identities. The themes that emerged from this data included 1) greater feelings of love and acceptance, especially as it relates to their LGBTQ+ identity, 2) having a deeper sense of meaning and life purpose due to the unique struggles of navigating their LGBTQ+ identity, 3) having greater empathy and compassion for others and making an active effort to live in alignment with one's values, 4) having enhanced relationships with others, including family members, romantic partners, and members of their communities, and finally 5) gaining strength from one's spirituality to cope with stigma related to one's LGBTQ+ identity.

The theme of love and acceptance that emerged from Rosenkrantz et al.'s (2016) study is particularly relevant to the link between spirituality and authenticity. Participants shared feeling supported by their spirituality in a way that allowed them to express their sexuality authentically. For instance, one participant shared, "One of the most important aspects I can take from my spiritual identity is that I was made by God in [their] image . . . In turn, I am not flawed, but perfectly made" (pp. 130-131). This quote shows how spirituality can help unlock a person's capacity to love and accept themselves unconditionally, giving them the freedom to be themselves regardless of the expectations imposed on them by society. This point was further emphasized by another participant who shared, "Once I realized that God was 100% cool with my sexuality, it became . . . easier to come out to others. . . it's hard to fear rejection from others when you know the God of the Universe has your back" (p. 131). Thus, one way in which spirituality may foster authenticity is by helping LGB+ individuals feel greater love and compassion toward themselves and their own identities.

The relationship between spirituality and self-compassion has also been validated empirically. Lassiter et al. (2023) conducted a longitudinal study with a sample of 697 sexual minority men to examine the relationship between spirituality, self-compassion, and anxiety. They found that self-compassion mediated the relationship between spirituality and anxiety such that an increase in spirituality predicted an increase in self-compassion, which in turn was negatively associated with anxiety at a 12-month follow-up. The direct association between spirituality and anxiety, however, was not significant. This finding supports the explanation that spirituality can support the mental health of LGB+ individuals by fostering greater self-compassion.

Another way in which spirituality may increase authenticity is through psychological flexibility, which is defined as the ability to stay connected to the present moment, being aware of one's emotions without altering them, and acting in accordance with one's values (Karakuş & Akbay, 2022). Lassiter and Mims (2022) conducted a qualitative study with 10 Black sexual minority men in which they asked them about the role spirituality plays in their lives. Out of the seven themes that emerged, three in particular are important to note: 1) emotional revelation, that is spiritual consciousness facilitating the recognition of emotions that are difficult to sit with, 2) emotional emancipation, that is spiritual consciousness facilitating the embodiment and expression of emotions without any judgment, and 3) emotional regulation, that is spiritual consciousness facilitating the increase of positive emotions and the decrease of negative emotions. These findings suggest that spirituality can help LGB+ individuals get in touch with parts of themselves that may otherwise be difficult to own. For instance, one participant from the



study shared, “If it were not for my spirituality, I would not know who I am. . . I would not know what I believed was the correct way to represent myself and to feel comfortable and to feel safe with myself” (p. 3086). Another participant shared, “My spirituality has allowed me to embrace my feelings, the whole spectrum, from the most wrathful, vengeful thing, to the most docile and sweet and most loving thing” (p. 3087). These quotes highlight how spirituality can free LGB+ individuals from the shackles of difficult emotions by allowing them to fully embrace their experiences.

Taken together, the findings suggest that spirituality can support the well-being of LGB+ individuals. More specifically, research suggests that spirituality may foster greater authenticity among LGB+ individuals by increasing their self-compassion and psychological flexibility. The following subsections will examine the relationship between self-compassion, psychological flexibility, and authenticity in greater detail.

### *Self-Compassion*

Self-compassion, as defined by Neff (2003), is an attitude that entails being caring toward oneself during difficult times. It consists of three components, 1) self-kindness, which refers to being loving and non-judgmental toward oneself, 2) common humanity, which refers to recognizing that one is not alone in their experience of suffering, and 3) mindfulness, which refers to being aware of one’s experiences without overidentifying with them. There is extensive research outlining the benefits of self-compassion for adaptive psychological functioning (Chan et al., 2020). Research also suggests that self-compassion is a psychological resource that can help individuals cope with sexual minority stress (see Helminen et al., 2023 for a review). For instance, being self-compassionate can ease the coming out process by allowing LGB+ individuals to be more self-accepting regardless of the reaction of others (Beard et al., 2017). Thus, self-compassion can play an important role in the well-being of LGB+ individuals.

Self-compassion may be particularly helpful for LGB+ individuals because of its association with authenticity. The theoretical link between self-compassion and authenticity can be traced back to Carl Rogers’s conceptualization of optimal human functioning (Zhang et al., 2019). Rogers (1961) believed that for a person to be connected to their real self, which he referred to as congruence, they must receive unconditional love and affirmation, which he referred to as unconditional positive regard (UPC). According to Rogers, UPC communicates to a person that they have inherent worth and that they do not need to be someone they are not in order to receive love and acceptance. Similarly, self-compassion, which can be conceptualized as UPC directed toward oneself, can help a person recognize that they deserve love and compassion regardless of who they are, thus fostering greater authenticity.

The link between self-compassion and authenticity has also received empirical support (Zhang et al., 2019). Zhang et al. (2019) conducted a series of studies, ranging from cross-sectional to longitudinal and experimental, which showed that self-compassion can help foster authenticity. In one of their experimental studies, the researchers assigned 298 college students to either a self-compassion condition, a self-esteem condition, or a control condition. Participants across all conditions were asked to reflect on and journal about a personal weakness of theirs. Participants in the self-compassion condition received additional instructions to write about the weakness from a compassionate perspective whereas participants in the self-esteem condition were asked to write from the perspective of validating their positive qualities. Results indicated that participants in the self-compassion condition had higher self-reported authenticity as compared to the other two conditions. These findings suggest that self-compassion can be even more effective than self-esteem in helping individuals cultivate greater authenticity.

Research also supports the effectiveness of self-compassion in increasing authenticity among LGB+ individuals specifically. For instance, Beard et al. (2017) examined the relationship between

self-compassion and gay identity development. Specifically, they studied whether self-compassion was related to pride, one of the later stages of gay identity development, and outness in a sample of 139 gay men. The authors distinguished between two kinds of pride: authentic and hubristic. Authentic pride is considered the more adaptive kind of pride in which attributions are made to internal and controllable causes (e.g., I worked hard to achieve that), whereas hubristic pride is considered maladaptive as it is attributed to internal and uncontrollable causes (e.g., I did well because I am smart). The results from the study indicated that self-compassion was positively correlated with outness, authentic pride, and general well-being, and negatively correlated with hubristic pride and internalized sexual stigma. Furthermore, when controlling for the other variables such as outness and internalized sexual stigma, two components of self-compassion significantly predicted well-being in the sample: greater self-kindness and lower isolation. These findings suggest that being kind to oneself during difficult times and not feeling alone in one’s experiences can promote positive well-being among gay men. Furthermore, the benefits of self-compassion are associated with greater authentic pride in one’s identity as well as greater openness about one’s identity.

The negative association between self-compassion and internalized sexual stigma provides additional insight into how self-compassion may foster greater authenticity. More specifically, self-compassion may act as a protective factor for LGB+ individuals by preventing the internalization of stigmatizing experiences and, thus, reducing internalized sexual stigma. This hypothesis was examined in a study by Chan et al. (2020) with a sample of 401 LGB+ individuals. The results indicated that self-compassion moderated the relationship between stigma stress and internalized sexual stigma such that individuals with greater self-compassion reported a weaker association between stigma stress and internalized sexual stigma. Similarly, self-compassion also moderated the relationship between stigma stress and mental health outcomes, namely depression, anxiety, social connectedness, and loneliness. These findings suggest that self-compassion can reduce the internalization of heterosexist attitudes and beliefs by buffering against the negative effects of public stigma, which may help LGB+ individuals not be afraid to be their authentic selves, ultimately promoting well-being.

### *Psychological Flexibility*

Psychological flexibility refers to the ability to experience situations as they are and respond to them in a way that aligns with one’s values. This construct has largely been studied within the context of acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT), a mindfulness- and acceptance-based treatment in which psychological flexibility is considered the mechanism of therapeutic change (Ramaci et al., 2019). Several studies suggest that psychological inflexibility is associated with negative mental health outcomes, such as depression, stress, anxiety, thought suppression, and substance abuse, while psychological flexibility is associated with positive well-being outcomes, including self-compassion (Doorley et al., 2020). Furthermore, the literature supports the efficacy of ACT in treating various mental health conditions, providing additional support for the benefits of psychological flexibility (Doorley et al., 2020).

An important characteristic of psychological flexibility is that it entails being in contact with one’s experiences and emotions without trying to control or modify them (Karakuş & Akbay, 2022). Thus, this trait may be particularly effective in helping people get connected to their authentic selves. Karakuş and Akbay (2022) conducted a study in which they examined the relationship between psychological flexibility, authenticity, life satisfaction, and alexithymia, which is an impairment in identifying one’s emotions, in a sample of 702 participants from Turkey. The researchers found that psychological flexibility mediated the relationship between alexithymia and authenticity such that alexithymia was associated with lower psychological flexibility, and lower psychological

flexibility was, in turn, associated with lower authenticity. Furthermore, psychological flexibility similarly mediated the relationship between alexithymia and life satisfaction. These findings suggest that psychological flexibility is associated with greater recognition of one's emotions, both positive and negative, which facilitates a stronger connection with one's real self.

Within the context of the LGBTQ+ experience, psychological flexibility may manifest as greater fluidity in one's gender or sexual identity. For instance, Higa et al. (2014) conducted a qualitative study with 68 LGBTQ+ youth, in which they examined the positive and negative factors that impact well-being in this population. One of the most common themes that emerged when considering the positive factors was the belief that the LGBTQ+ identity is flexible. One participant shared, "The thing that's really cool about [being LGBTQ] is I'm a very independent person, and it gives me a sense of, not like standing out, but it gives me a sense of being unique and individual" (p. 673). As the quote suggests, being LGBTQ+ may offer individuals greater freedom to identify with what feels right to them. As discussed earlier, the context in which LGB+ individuals discover themselves often falls outside of the structure created by rigid gender norms. This unique circumstance may allow sexual minority individuals to listen to their true selves rather than requiring them to modify their experiences to satisfy societal expectations. Thus, greater fluidity in one's gender and sexual identity, a sign of psychological flexibility, may be another way in which greater authenticity is cultivated in this population.

### Clinical Implications and Future Directions

Overall, as reviewed in this paper, research suggests that authenticity is a key protective factor for LGB+ well-being. Authenticity can be compromised among sexual minority individuals who have high levels of internalized heterosexism due to self-criticism and shame toward one's identity. Having a strong sense of spirituality, on the other hand, may be one way to counteract the negative effects of internalized stigma among LGB+ individuals by promoting self-compassion and psychological flexibility. While studies have examined the link between authenticity and the aforementioned variables individually, these variables have yet to be studied together in a unified model. Based on the theoretical foundation provided in this review, future research should consider empirically examining factors such as internalized heterosexism, spirituality, self-compassion, and psychological flexibility that can foster or hinder authenticity in LGB+ individuals.

The findings from such research would have important implications for the development of evidence-based treatments for sexual minority individuals. To date, LGB-affirmative treatments have mostly focused on helping clients cope with minority stress by addressing factors such as shame, self-criticism, internalized heterosexism, and other forms of stigma-related stress (Pachankis, 2018; Petrocchi et al., 2016). Given the research on the role of authenticity in the well-being of LGB+ individuals, clinicians might consider reconceptualizing the target of their treatments. While a major goal of the treatment may still be to address minority stress, an additional goal may be to help clients develop resilience and inner strength by allowing them to cultivate greater authenticity. As reviewed in this paper, this may be done by using techniques that nurture clients' spirituality, help them cultivate self-compassion, and increase their psychological flexibility.

LGB-affirmative compassion-focused therapy (CFT) is one type of treatment that focuses on helping sexual minority clients cultivate greater compassion (Pepping et al., 2017; Petrocchi et al., 2016). The goal of CFT is to help clients get connected with their "compassionate self" and shift from a threat system to a contentment and safety system (Petrocchi et al., 2016). While self-compassion is a prominent aspect of CFT, the treatment model emphasizes fostering compassion in general, which includes being able to receive and give compassion to others. Considering the association between self-compassion and authenticity found in the

literature, future research should also examine the role of general compassion in helping LGB+ individuals cultivate authenticity.

Lastly, the focus of this review was on factors that contribute to the psychological well-being of LGB+ individuals. However, research suggests that authenticity can also contribute to other aspects of well-being, such as sexual and relational well-being. For instance, studies have found that authenticity is negatively associated with sexual compulsivity and that self-hate is positively associated with risky sexual behavior among sexual minority adults (Ballard & Oswald, 2022; Nappa et al., 2022). Furthermore, another study found that authenticity was related to greater feelings of belongingness among Latinx LGBTQ+ youth (Gonzalez et al., 2022). Future studies should expand on this line of research and explore how cultivating authenticity can help sexual minority individuals in different aspects of their well-being.

### Conclusion

The aim of this review was to increase our understanding of the role of authenticity in the psychological well-being of sexual minority populations. The current literature suggests that authenticity may be a unique psychological strength that sexual minority individuals develop as a result of navigating their sexual minority identity within a heteronormative sociocultural context. While growing up, sexual minority individuals are required to make meaning out of the unique experience of confronting desires that deviate from the societal norm. The realization that their own existence challenges these societal norms may empower sexual minority people to trust their inner compass to guide them through life, allowing them to come closer to their authentic selves.

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