

Finding Hope in Community: How Queer Youth Are Redefining Mental Health Support in Their Communities



Despite being surrounded by classmates, **Elio** (he/him) felt disconnected. Imagine walking into a crowded room—conversations flowing, laughter ringing out, familiar faces everywhere—yet feeling invisible. For **Elio**, this was an everyday reality.

“I was really lonely, and I often felt isolated. I didn’t have a community. I didn’t have queer people to be friends with and surround myself with.”

-Elio (he/him)

Without a sense of belonging, even the most familiar spaces became reminders of what was missing.

For **Ragno** (any/all), school was not just a place of isolation but a source of torment. Struggling with body dysmorphia and relentless bullying, they internalized the pain until it felt like a fundamental truth: “I’m not worthy of life.” Though their parents did their best to offer love and support, it only deepened **Ragno’s** guilt, making it harder to voice the pain they carried. The weight of feeling unseen and misunderstood became its own burden—a silence that so many queer youth know too well.



VIDEO CLIP: HEAR MORE FROM RAGNO (ANY/ALL) ABOUT THE NEED TO BREAK THE STIGMA AND SILENCE WHEN IT COMES TO SUICIDE

Neptune (they/them) recalls struggling with their mental health but having “no help or way to talk about it.” Lacking resources or a safe space to process their emotions, their depression and anxiety deepened—challenges that took years to learn how to manage. Their experience highlights the ongoing mental health crisis among LGBTQ+ youth in California, where many face significant barriers to accessing mental health care. In fact, [half of LGBTQ+ young people in the state wanted support but were unable to receive it.](#)

The experiences of **Elio**, **Ragno**, and **Neptune** reflect a broader reality. Many queer youth navigate environments where they feel either invisible or even actively excluded. Two of every three LGBTQ+ teens experience symptoms of anxiety, and more than half experience symptoms of depression.

Creating Safe and Supportive School Environments

Protection against this despair can be found in safe, affirming spaces where queer youth feel like they belong. Studies show that inclusive school policies and LGBTQ+ student organizations, such as Gender-Sexuality Alliance (GSA) clubs, significantly improve mental health outcomes for LGBTQ+ youth. These student-led organizations promote inclusivity, educate about LGBTQ+ issues, and create a sense of community and acceptance. They provide structured, supportive spaces where LGBTQ+ students and allies can connect, share experiences, and advocate for safer school environments.



Photo of the Rainbow Pride Youth Alliance (RPYA)

LGBTQ+ students with access to GSAs and inclusive school policies [report stronger school belonging and lower mental health distress](#). Additional studies on transgender youth mental health indicate that affirming environments help reduce the risk of suicide.

Schools are increasingly recognizing the importance of these spaces and working to expand GSAs as a critical tool for fostering belonging and improving student well-being.

Salma Torres (they/them/elle), Director of Education and Generational Advocacy at CalPride, is leading efforts to establish GSAs in schools across seven Central California counties, with most activities and events taking place in Stanislaus, Merced, Tuolumne, and Calaveras counties. With Children and Youth Behavioral Health Initiative (CYBHI) funding supporting operations, their work is ensuring that more students have access to these critical spaces.

“Hatred and bigotry are happening in our community, but then we go into schools, into a GSA space, and for one hour, we can shut out the hate and give kids one hour of joy—whether it’s just sitting around laughing or discussing songs and take-out,” says Torres

–Salma Torres (they/them/elle), Director of Education and Generational Advocacy at CalPride

This sentiment is shared by Elio (he/him) who emphasizes that “many queer youth don’t feel safe or comfortable expressing themselves, or even just existing” and safe spaces to be themselves are life-saving.



VIDEO CLIP: HEAR FROM ELIO (HE/HIM) ABOUT THE IMPORTANCE OF SAFE SPACES

For many LGBTQ+ youth, these affirming spaces can mean the difference between isolation and connection. Dr. Jon Higgins (they/them), Director of Strategic Communications & Advocacy Programs at Rainbow Pride Youth Alliance shares a similar reflection: “If I was 14, 15, or 16 and I learned that there were other queer Black and brown kids going through what I was going through and sharing the same emotions, then I probably wouldn’t have felt as I felt, and I probably wouldn’t have been as suicidal as I was.”



VIDEO CLIP: FROM DR. JON HIGGINS (THEY/THEM), DIRECTOR OF STRATEGIC COMMUNICATIONS & ADVOCACY PROGRAMS, ABOUT THE POWER OF COMMUNITY FOR VULNERABLE YOUTH

Beyond Schools: Community-Based Mental Health Support

While school-based resources like GSAs create critical spaces of connection, support for LGBTQ+ youth must also extend beyond school walls and into the broader community. That’s where initiatives like S.P.E.A.K. and LYRIC come in—ensuring that young people have access to mental health tools, peer support, and affirming spaces wherever they are.

A youth-led program of the Rainbow Pride Youth Alliance (RPYA), S.P.E.A.K.—which stands for Suicide Prevention, Education, and Knowledge—empowers young people to take an active role in their own mental health and advocate for their peers in community settings. The program is funded by the California Department of Public Health (CDPH) as part of the state’s CYBHI.



VIDEO CLIP: HEAR FROM LUCIUS (HE/THEY) ABOUT HOW HE WAS ABLE TO SAVE THE LIFE OF A FRIEND

Lucius (he/they) credits the skills he learned through S.P.E.A.K. with helping him save a friend’s life. **Neptune** (they/them) describes a similar ripple effect in their community, calling it a “butterfly effect”—where one act of support leads to another, creating a growing network of care and awareness. By fostering connections and sharing mental health resources, they’ve empowered others to step up and support those who are struggling. “It’s the domino effect of having the tools and the knowledge that I have,” **Neptune** explains—a chain reaction that has sparked meaningful conversations about mental health and the importance of seeking and providing help.



VIDEO CLIP: HEAR FROM NEPTUNE (THEY/THEM) ABOUT DISCUSSING MENTAL HEALTH WITH FRIENDS AND FAMILY

In the Bay Area, LYRIC, one of the country's oldest LGBTQ+ organizations, provides much-needed support with a team that reflects the community they serve. Mario (Mar) Balcita (they/them), Vice President of People and Programs, underscores the importance of drop-in spaces, where youth can find unstructured, pressure-free environments to connect and feel safe: "Opportunities for youth to connect with peers in a safe space are vital. When they go out into the larger community, they need to know they're not alone in a world that often refuses to let them be themselves," says Balcita. Sometimes, the impact is as simple as having a place to just be. "One of our most successful groups is our Dungeons & Dragons group, a space to have fun and take a break from the stress of constantly navigating who they can and cannot be in the outside world."

Salma Torres (they/them/elle) echoes the power of these spaces, emphasizing that many youth struggle to focus in school—or don't attend at all—because they don't feel safe. For LGBTQ+ youth, these community-based spaces are more than just a refuge—they are lifelines, offering a sense of belonging that affirms and protects their identity in a world that too often tells them they don't belong.

"That's what I love most about our CYBHI-funded programs. We create a space where, for just one hour, they don't have to think about bullying or harassment. They don't have to fear being authentically themselves. It's just an hour, but it's everything. They don't have to constantly curate what they say, worrying, 'Am I too gay? Too trans? Too out there?' They can just exist."

-Salma Torres (they/them/elle), Director of Education and Generational Advocacy at CalPride

Rooted in Identity: The Intersection of Culture and Mental Health

For many LGBTQ+ youth, finding a supportive community isn't just about connecting with others who share their gender or sexual identity—it's also about finding people who understand their cultural identity. The way different communities view gender, sexuality, and mental health varies. Seeing someone who looks like you, speaks your language, and shares your lived experiences can be essential to forming the kind of community that helps LGBTQ+ youth thrive.

"I knew, reasonably, that there were people out there experiencing the same things as me, but I couldn't find them, and I had no outlet to reach out to them."

-Carmen (she/her, he/him), member of the Shiishongna Tongva Nation

Carmen (she/her, he/him), a member of the Shiishongna Tongva Nation, recalls the difficulty of finding that kind of connection. Programs like S.P.E.A.K. and Two Feathers' Youth Ambassador Program are working to change that, helping young people build connections rooted in both identity and culture.



VIDEO CLIP: HEAR FROM CARMEN (SHE/HER, HE/HIM), A MEMBER OF THE SHIISHONGNA TONGVA NATION ABOUT EXPERIENCING SUICIDE IDEATION AND CONNECTING WITH THEIR TWO-SPIRIT IDENTITY

Two Feathers' Youth Ambassador Program, also supported by CYBHI, works with LGBTQ+/Two-Spirit youth to reduce suicide, self-harm, and suicide attempts. By integrating peer-based mental health services with cultural values and healing practices, the program fosters a deep sense of connection and belonging—proving that identity-affirming spaces save lives.

Digital Connection: How Online Spaces Support LGBTQ+ Mental Health

Community isn't just found in physical spaces—it can thrive online too. California's [Never a Bother](#) campaign partners with youth as content creators to spread the message that young people are never a burden. Like many facing mental health challenges, **Ragno** understands that “being able to tell someone what you need can be one of the hardest things for a person to do.” That's why they're excited to work with Never a Bother: “The content creation has been wonderful. I love being able to put myself out there as someone advocating for this.”

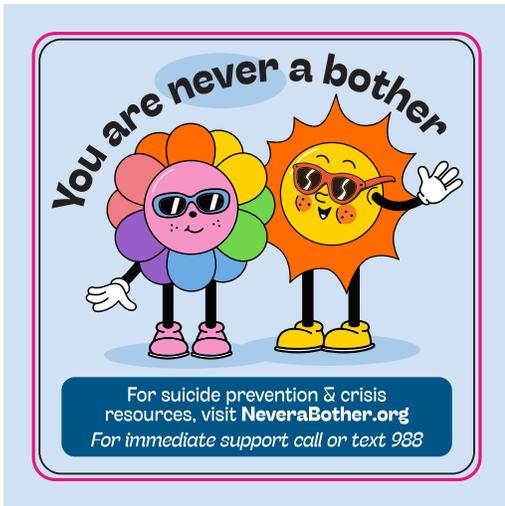


VIDEO CLIP: EDUARDO (HE/THEY) SHARES HIS EXPERIENCE WITH ISOLATION IN MIDDLE SCHOOL AND HOW ONLINE COMMUNITIES LIKE NEVER A BOTHER CAN HELP.

[Youth have shared](#) that mental health care must be rooted in community, culturally responsive, and accessible through multiple pathways. Despite increased awareness and efforts, LGBTQ+ youth in California continue to face barriers to accessing the support they need. [A new report](#) from The Trevor Project highlights the urgency of the issue: 11% of LGBTQ+ youth in California attempted suicide in the past year, including 14% of trans and nonbinary youth—higher than the national average of 12% for both groups.

Systemic change takes time, but progress is happening—recognizing that healing comes through many hands, from trained peers and community leaders to healthcare professionals, all working together to support young people.

To keep youth like **Elio, Ragno, Neptune**, and thousands of others safe, advocates and researchers are calling for expanded access to mental health care and affirming spaces for LGBTQ+ youth. [A growing body of research highlights](#) the need for more mental health professionals, increased safe spaces, and stronger community support systems. CYBHI is one pathway addressing these needs, expanding mental health support in schools, healthcare, and community settings. Programs like the [Youth Peer-to-Peer Support Program](#) and the [Youth Mental Health Academy](#) are working to train the next generation of mental health providers, with a focus on young people of color and LGBTQIA+ youth.



But LGBTQ+ mental health support isn't just about programs—it happens in everyday moments. A single conversation can be life-saving, which is why peer-to-peer support models are so vital. "It's really important that people get trained in suicide prevention," says **Eduardo** (any/all), "Otherwise, people don't know how to have that life-changing conversation." He explains that even having experienced suicidal thoughts himself, it can still be difficult to talk to someone else about it, saying, "That suicide prevention training gives you the platform and the format for how to approach those conversations." **Ash** (he/they) also believes that the connection they have found in S.P.E.A.K. can help keep vulnerable youth safe, explaining how, "Growing up I dealt

with mental health struggles on my own and there was really no one I could talk to. Now at least I have the knowledge to help others."



VIDEO CLIP: HEAR FROM ASH (HE/THEY) ABOUT BREAKING THE STIGMA AROUND MENTAL HEALTH AND SUICIDE

For youth in these programs, the impact is profound. They feel connected to their communities and cultures, improving their own mental well-being while learning how to support others. Programs like GSA, S.P.E.A.K, Never a Bother, Two Feathers' Youth Ambassador Program, and the Youth Mental Health Academy all share a simple but powerful foundation: peer support and connection—as well as a sense of belonging, respect, and care.

Jen Lupercio, program coordinator for Rainbow Pride Alliance, has seen this firsthand, "We all know community is important, but we're actually building it. Watching these young people become vulnerable, advocate for themselves, and support their friends—it's beautiful."

In a world that can feel isolating and overwhelming at times, these youth are turning to the transformative power of community being established by new resources in California. **Lucius** (he/they) describes connection as a source of understanding and reassurance. “Not many people have someone they can relate to,” they explain, “But through connection, understanding, and shared effort, we build a foundation for mental well-being—reminding us that no one is truly alone in their journey.”

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Get Involved

Suicide is a complex problem requiring collaborative solutions at multiple levels, including individuals, families, schools, and communities. Suicide prevention can only be effective when everyone is part of the solution. Here are some actions you can take:

- Learn how you can support yourself, a friend, or a youth in your care before, during, and after a crisis.
- Tell a friend or a young person in your care that they are never a bother and encourage them to reach out for help when they need it.
- Download free resources and get involved at NeveraBother.org.
- And remember, if you are experiencing thoughts of suicide or worried about someone else, you are not alone. Call or text 988 to reach the free and confidential Suicide & Crisis Lifeline (24/7). Trained professionals can reconnect you with your reasons to keep going and show you ways to cope with difficult days.
- If you want to help a 2SLGBTQIA+ friend or young person, feel safe reaching out—whether it’s before, during, or after a crisis—build trust by creating a safe space: Introduce yourself with your name + pronouns and always ask for theirs (don’t assume). State publicly that you’re 2SLGBTQ+ friendly/affirming.