

PREVALENCE OF ANXIETY AND DEPRESSION AMONG MEN WHO HAVE SEX WITH MEN IN SERBIA

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Background: Sexual minorities including men who have sex with men (MSM), face higher rates of poor mental health compared to the general population. In Europe, 18.4% of MSM report moderate or severe anxiety/depression, with 7.7% experiencing severe symptoms.

Methods and Objectives: We conducted a respondent-driven sampling bio-behavioral study involving 1,300 MSM in Serbia—400 from Belgrade and 300 each from Novi Sad, Nis, and Kragujevac. Aiming to assess anxiety and depression prevalence, we used the Patient Health Questionnaire, version 4 (PHQ-4). We used translation from the validated Serbian PHQ-9 for two question, and for the other two adapted Serbian pilot version of the Generalized Anxiety Disorder, version 7 (GAD-7) scale.

Results: Participants had a mean age of 31.1 years (± 8.7), with Niš respondents being significantly younger (28.8 ± 8.4) compared to Belgrade, Novi Sad, and Kragujevac (31.5 ± 8.0 , 31.9 ± 8.5 , 32.2 ± 9.5 , respectively; $p < 0.001$). Overall, 19.2% of MSM reported moderate or severe anxiety/depression, with highest rate in Nis (32%) compared to Belgrade (15.5%), Novi Sad (12.3%), and Kragujevac (18.3%; $p < 0.001$). Severe symptoms were reported by 5.6% of MSM, with highest prevalence in Nis (10.0%) compared to Belgrade (4.0%), Novi Sad (3.0%), and Kragujevac (6.0%; $p < 0.001$). Anxiety was reported by 24.9% of MSM, significantly more in Nis (48.7%) than in Belgrade (16.3%), Novi Sad (15.3%), and Kragujevac (22.3%; $p < 0.001$). Depression was reported by 19.2% of MSM, significantly more in Nis (29.3%) compared to Belgrade (12.5%), Novi Sad (14.3%), and Kragujevac (23%; $p < 0.001$).

Conclusions: Although the PHQ-4 is not a diagnostic tool and may overestimate the prevalence of anxiety and depression, it indicates significant mental health concerns among MSM, particularly in Nis. There is a clear need for targeted behavioral and structural interventions to improve mental well-being of MSM.

Keywords: men who have sex with men, PHQ-4, anxiety, depression, mental health