Out of the Blue is a project partnership formed to investigate the potential for digital interventions to reduce the stigma associated with mental health conditions (such as anxiety and depression) for men aged 30-64. It’s one of six projects in beyondblue’s Stigma Reduction Interventions: Digital Environments (STRIDE) program, made possible by funding from the Movember Foundation. The two-year program started in July 2015 and ended in June 2017.

Out of the Blue includes a mix of organisations with backgrounds in research, digital design, community engagement, and peer support services. Led by the Victorian AIDS Council (VAC), the partnership includes: ACON, Centre for Social Research in Health (UNSW Sydney), Liquorice Living Positive Victoria, and GAMMA NSW.
**WHAT’S THE BIG IDEA?**

The project’s digital intervention is a common wireframe, or site structure, used to create two websites aimed at two different groups of men that experience high rates of anxiety, depression, and stigma. For men living with HIV, there is PETE.org.au. For same-sex attracted men living in a ‘straight’ relationship, commonly known as ‘gay and married men’, there is DALE.org.au. As part of the common wireframe, both PETE and DALE include: articles, forums, live chats, links to additional support services, and a system for managing the sites’ various users.

According to the HIV Futures 7, a national survey of Australians living with HIV, 48% of respondents reported that they have been diagnosed with a mental health condition. Of those 48% of people, 87.5% had been diagnosed with depression and 57.7% reported being diagnosed with anxiety.

For men living with HIV, experiences of stigma often include the stigma associated with anxiety and/or depression as well as HIV stigma. PETE, short for ‘Positive Engagement To Empower’, was created to engage men living with HIV who are also experiencing anxiety and/or depression and empowering them to tackle complex stigma.

For same-sex attracted men living in a ‘straight’ relationship, DALE was created as an online community for ‘Digital Acceptance Learning and Empowerment’. These men experience the stigma associated with anxiety and/or depression alongside the stigma associated with their same-sex attraction. Considered a ‘hard-to-reach’ group, very few support services exist for these men across Australia.

Because of the lack of research around same-sex attracted men living in a ‘straight’ relationship, we conducted preliminary telephone interviews with this population of men in Australia. The purpose of these interviews was to gain insight into the issues that are relevant to these men. The findings indicated that these men experienced poor mental health, including internalised stigma, depression and anxiety.

These findings helped guide how we developed DALE. It also showed a real need for an online community that offered a way to connect with likeminded guys, whether you’re based in Brisbane or Broome.

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Grierson, J., Pitts, M., & Koelmeyer, R. (2013). HIV Futures Seven: The health and wellbeing of HIV positive people in Australia. Australian Research Centre in Sex Health and Society, La Trobe University: Melbourne, Australia.

What do PETE & DALE offer?

The project uses an approach that combines education and peer contact to reduce the experiences of self stigma (stigmatising views that individuals hold about themselves) and perceived stigma (a person’s beliefs about the stigmatising views that other people hold) in the two respective communities of men.

Both PETE and DALE do this through a common set of features, including:

• Articles
  A collection of short articles about information around stigma, mental health and related issues are offered to users alongside personal stories from men with similar experiences.

• Forums
  The forums offer ongoing conversations with peers around an array of issues related to living with anxiety and/or depression, experiences of stigma, and topics related to living with HIV or being same-sex attracted in a heterosexual relationship.

• Live Chats
  The Live Chats offer a real-time connection with like-minded men. The sessions are peer-moderated chats scheduled at specific times with a particular topic to prompt discussion.

• Support
  There are times when we all need a little back up. Both websites list additional national and state-based resources and services should users require the additional support.

• User Management System
  The user management system allows for users to create unique profiles while respecting their anonymity in the online community. Through their profile settings, users can select to receive notifications from the site about when new chat sessions are scheduled or new content is posted. This system also accommodates various levels of access to allow for Peer Moderators and project administrators to ensure the online space is a safe and inviting one for users.

Both PETE and DALE were designed and developed through consultation with peer advisory groups from the respective communities of men they were crafted for. Furthermore, the trained Peer Moderators facilitate conversations in the forums and live chats to help ensure users are connecting with like-minded men in a safe and welcoming online environment.
**HOW'D IT ALL GO?**

Developing a digital intervention that respects the privacy of users takes time. Building trust amongst an online community takes even more time. After a soft launch of PETE and DALE in July 2016, the sites were promoted through existing services, print media, community events/forums, and online advertisements on social networking sites/apps used by the target groups of men.

When users came onto PETE and DALE, they were prompted to participate in an online survey to help us evaluate the respective site they were visiting. The survey took approximately 15 minutes to complete. These baseline surveys measured of psychological distress and mental health stigma as well as questions about demographics and risk.

From July 2016 through April 2017, a high number of people visited PETE (n=6,733) and DALE (n=9,499).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sessions by state</th>
<th>PETE</th>
<th>DALE</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>N=9,083</td>
<td>N=12,115</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Australian Capital Territory</td>
<td>161 (2%)</td>
<td>191 (2%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New South Wales</td>
<td>3,234 (36%)</td>
<td>4,278 (35%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Northern Territory</td>
<td>36 (4%)</td>
<td>46 (&lt;1%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Queensland</td>
<td>1,314 (14%)</td>
<td>2,004 (17%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Australia</td>
<td>511 (6%)</td>
<td>812 (7%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tasmania</td>
<td>71 (1%)</td>
<td>174 (1%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Victoria</td>
<td>3,041 (33%)</td>
<td>3,410 (28%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Western Australia</td>
<td>713 (8%)</td>
<td>1,200 (10%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of sessions by technology used</th>
<th>PETE</th>
<th>DALE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mobile</td>
<td>4,337 (47%)</td>
<td>6,179 (48%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tablet</td>
<td>3,541 (38%)</td>
<td>3,849 (30%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Desktop</td>
<td>1,368 (15%)</td>
<td>2,766 (22%)</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

However, only a very small number of visits converted to survey completions to date. So we could only evaluate the data collected from users on DALE for the purpose of this report. Here's some of what we found out from the 118 eligible same-sex attracted men living in a heterosexual relationship or lifestyle:

- **24% IDENTIFIED AS GAY, 61% AS BISEXUAL AND 13% AS HETEROSEXUAL**
- **OVER 30% OF MEN MET THE CRITERIA FOR MODERATE, SEVERE TO EXTREMELY SEVERE ANXIETY AND DEPRESSION**
- **OVER 50% OF THE SAMPLE REPORTED HAZARDOUS ALCOHOL USE (56%)**

The mean scores for each of the stigma measures are reported below:

- **GENERALISED ANXIETY STIGMA SCALE (GASS): MEAN 19.80 (SD 7.71), RANGE 0-40**
- **DEPRESSION STIGMA SCALE (DSS): MEAN 19.20 (SD 6.45), RANGE 0-36**
- **INTERNALISED STIGMA SCALE: MEAN 19.28 (SD 5.51), RANGE 6-30**

Levels of anxiety and depression-related stigma were comparable, though slightly lower than that found in other samples of the Australian population. Internalised stigma related to anxiety and depression appeared to be quite high in this group, with the mean score falling past the mid-way mark. For all the stigma measures, the range of participant responses is representative of the possible range for each measure. For example, the lowest possible score for the GASS is 0 and the highest is 40. This shows that some people reported very low levels of anxiety- and depression-related, and internalised stigma, while others were exhibiting extremely high levels of stigma.
All three stigma measures were statistically associated with psychological distress, suggesting that participants who reported greater levels of anxiety-, depression- and internalised stigma appeared to experience greater psychological distress. Internalised stigma was additionally associated with disclosure of sexual attraction to men, in that those guys who had greater levels of internalised stigma reported less disclosure to their family, friends, sexual partners, health workers, as well as work colleagues and employers.

**WHAT'S NEXT?**

There is significant evidence around HIV-related stigma as well as the stigma associated with mental health; however, there is very little research that reports on mental health and stigma among men living with HIV. In light of the small sample of men living with HIV who participated in the PETE survey to date, further research is needed.

The project had hoped to conduct follow-up surveys to evaluate any changes in the experience of stigma for men using the PETE and DALE sites; however, due to the small numbers of participants taking part in the baseline surveys, follow-up surveys could not be implemented in time for this report. Participants who completed a survey evaluating the DALE website will be invited to take part in a follow-up survey beyond this report and the findings will submitted to beyondblue at a later date.

From the results of the phone interviews conducted and the surveys conducted through the DALE website, we have gained significant insight into same-sex attracted men living in a heterosexual relationship or lifestyle. In fact, the results presented in the *Out of the Blue: PETE & DALE* final report represent the largest quantitative research to be conducted among this group of men to date.

We know these men report experiencing anxiety and depression in relation to their sexual identity. They also report high levels of perceived and internalised stigma related to anxiety and depression, which were found to be associated with greater psychological distress among this group.

Given that there are a limited number of resources available, there is a definite need for resources aimed at same-sex attracted men living in a heterosexual relationship – such as the online community on DALE. Furthermore, there is a need to develop resources to assist counseling and medical professionals working with these men to better understand their complex needs.

The nature of the digital intervention model used to create PETE and DALE requires more time. The project hoped to positively impact the lives of men from discreet populations, often within already marginalised groups. With additional time we may see significant results and better understand the full potential of this approach.