Affirmative Counseling with LGBT Clients

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Principles of Affirmative Counseling
LGBT Clients
This is a set of affirming principles I put together after reading many such lists of affirming counseling. There are obviously many ways to be affirming these are the eight I chose to focus on.
✦ AFFIRM
✦ ADVOCATE
✦ BE SELF AWARE
✦ UNDERSTAND INTERSECTIONALITY
✦ HONOR LIFE EXPERIENCE
✦ ASK
✦ RECOGNIZE AFFECTS OF DISCRIMINATION
✦ PROMOTE SOCIAL CHANGE
Affirm Your LGBT Clients

How do you do this?

✦ Have an affirming office space-see next slide

✦ Affirm their life experiences when they talk about them—never challenge their identity or the words they use to express their identity

✦ Mirror back the language they use

✦ Respect where they are in their process and allow for it to change

✦ LGBT may come to a therapist for support on issues that are not LGBT related. Be with the client where they are.
Creating an Affirming Office Space

It is very important that if you work with LGBT clients that your office space is affirming and safe for them.

A few things to think about

- Post a non-discrimination policy in your waiting area
- Post artwork or provide magazines that are relevant to LGBT clients
- Have intake forms where people can indicate the name they use for insurance billing and the name that they would like to be referred to by
- If you ask about gender on an intake form have all the possible answers
- Make sure questions about relationship status indicate a committed relationship that may not include marriage
- Have books in your office about LGBT people
- Make sure if you have office staff they are all properly trained to work with LGBT people
- Put your pronouns in your email signature
- Make sure you ask and have on intake forms what pronouns clients use

Many LGBT people, especially TGNC people have had bad experiences with healthcare providers in the past so they will be looking for clues in your office (and on your website) that indicate whether or not you will be providing a safe place.
ADVOCATE
Advocate for your LGBT clients

- Working with LGBT clients means you cannot just do therapy you will also be called upon to advocate for your clients.

- It is important for you to be familiar with the laws and protections available for LGBT clients in your area. You should be able to make referrals for both medical care and for community resources for your clients.

- You may be asked to write a variety of different letters to help clients get their needs met.

- You may need to call and/or educate other providers on behalf of your clients.
BE SELF AWARE
Be Self Aware

When working with LGBT clients it is very important that you have done your own work around your gender identity, sexual orientation, and your own privilege in the world. You need to have an awareness of the other issues that intersect with gender and sexual orientation and be able to explore them openly with your clients.
UNDERSTAND INTERSECTIONALITY
Understand Intersectionality

"Intersectionality" is a term coined by American civil rights advocate Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw to describe overlapping or *intersecting* social identities and related systems of oppression, domination, or discrimination. Intersectionality is the idea that multiple identities intersect to create a whole that is different from the component identities. These identities that can intersect include gender, race, social class, ethnicity, nationality, sexual orientation, religion, age, mental disability, physical disability, mental illness, and physical illness as well as other forms of identity. These aspects of identity are not "unitary, mutually exclusive entities, but rather...reciprocally constructing phenomena." The theory proposes that we think of each element or trait of a person as inextricably linked with all of the other elements in order to fully understand one's identity.


Intersectionality life and experiences of our LGBT clients are not just about their gender identity and sexual orientation but about all of their identities and experiences. It is important to ask the questions and listen to your client's life experiences.
HONOR LIFE EXPERIENCE
Honor Life Experiences

Many times I have had a TGNC client tell me they had a therapist tell them they were not transgender or told them how they needed to transition. TGNC clients are not all the same and each will have their own process on how they want to navigate their experiences and transition if they choose to do so. It is for the therapist to explore the feelings about this and make referrals as needed not to challenge a client's lived experience.

The same invalidation has been common for bisexual people who are often told that they just can't decide or that their identity is not valid.

For LGBT people honoring lived experiences includes respecting decisions to come out or not and respecting what constitutes a family/relationship for them. Many LGBT people have a “chosen” family that may be more supportive than a family of origin.
ASK
Ask Questions

Never make assumptions about your LGBT client's experience, process, or relationships. Always ask the questions.

At the same time, it is important not to put your clients in a position where they have to educate you. That is your job.
RECOGNIZE AFFECTS OF DISCRIMINATION
Recognize the Affects of Discrimination

As seen in the handout on discrimination, we know that LGBT people face discrimination. Their jobs may not be protected. They may be harassed in bathrooms. They are in danger of being physically harmed or even murdered. The affects of carrying the weight of this can be overwhelming. This may affect a client's mood and well being. It is not being LGBT that causes mental health issues but instead the lack of safety in the world for LGBT people that can cause them. This can be especially true for TGNC people. And even more so for LGBT people of color.
PROMOTE SOCIAL CHANGE
Promote Social Change

As providers, we need to go beyond advocacy and also support the LGBT community in other active ways. This can be done in a variety of different ways. Educating others when the opportunity arises. Donating money to reputable organizations that advocate for LGBT causes. But fostering social change is an important part of our work and may even be a part of your ethical guidelines.
REFERENCES
http://www.counseling.org/Resources/Competencies/ALGBTIC_Competencies.pdf
Accessed April 21, 2017

Guidelines for Psychological Practice With Transgender and Gender Nonconforming People American Psychological Association 2015 American Psychologist

James Guay, LMFT presentation Affirmative Therapy with Transgender and Gender Non-Conforming Clients

LGBT Affirmative Therapy Tips for creating a more lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, & queer inclusive practice from the AAMFT Queer Affirmative Caucus
https://education.uoregon.edu/sites/default/files/affirmative_therapy_handout_0.pdf  accessed April 21, 2017