Affirmative Counseling with LGTBQ+ Clients

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Principles of Affirmative Counseling With LGBTQ+ Clients
• AFFIRM
• ADVOCATE
• BE SELF AWARE
• UNDERSTAND INTERSECTIONALITY
• HONOR LIFE EXPERIENCE
• ASK
• RECOGNIZE EFFECTS OF MINORITY STRESS
• PROMOTE SOCIAL CHANGE
• BE TRAUMA RESPONSIVE
Affirm Your LGBTQ+ Clients

How do you do this?

✦ Have an affirming office space—see next slide

✦ Affirm their life experiences—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
Creating an Affirming Office Space

It is very important that if you work with LGBTQ+ 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 LGBTQ+ 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 LGBTQ+ people
- Make sure if you have office staff they are all properly trained to work with LGBTQ+ people
- Put your pronouns in your email signature
- Make sure you ask and have on intake forms what pronouns clients use

Most LGBTQ+ 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 LGBTQ+ clients

- Working with LGBTQ+ 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 LGBTQ+ 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 LGBTQ+ clients you must do your work around your gender identity, your sexuality, and your privilege. You need to have an awareness of the other issues that intersect with gender and sexuality and be able to explore them openly with your clients. Do the work including anti-racist work.
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." (1)

The life and experiences of our LGBTQ+ clients are not just about their gender identity and sexuality but about all of their identities and experiences. It is important to ask the questions and listen to your client's life experiences.

This means you need to get training on the intersections that your clients will have from people that have lived experiences with those intersections.
Honor life experience
Many LGBTQ+ clients report experiences of being invalidated and even abused by mental health providers. They complain of having lived experiences challenged. They get told that they are not transgender or bisexual based on the therapist's belief system. They get made to feel invisible when they do not see themselves reflected in your paperwork or office.

LGBTQ+ clients are diverse. Their use of language for their identities may vary and you should always honor their language and experiences. It is never a therapist’s job to challenge what the client believes around their identity. This is why therapists need training from people with lived experience to be most effective with their LGBTQ+ clients. This includes people who have the lived experience of each of the letters of the LGBTQ+ community.
Ask Questions

Never make assumptions about your LGBTQ+ client's experience, process, or relationships. Always ask the questions.
recognize effects of minority stress
Recognize the Effects of Minority Stress

We know that LGBTQ+ people face discrimination. Only recently was there a Supreme Court decision saying that their employment should be protected. Marriage Equality was only gained on the Federal level in 2015. The effects of carrying the weight of discrimination can be overwhelming. This may affect a client's mood and well being. Minority Stress can be causing most of your client’s mental health symptoms.
Recognize the Effects of Minority Stress

In 2003, Ilan Meyer wrote an article on Minority Stress and how it affects the LGB community. Subsequently research has also linked this to transgender people. (2)

He identified three types of stressors

A. **General Stress** - examples are barriers to health care

B. **Distal minority stress** - these include adverse reactions from the community that are related to the persons minority identity. These may be chronic or acute and these are objective experiences. They may occur at structural, interpersonal, or individual levels. Examples of this are any experiences of discrimination such as housing or employment. (3)

C. **Proximal Minority stress** - these include internalized negative beliefs about identity and fears of discrimination and these are more subjective. (4) Examples include fear of rejection due to minority status or rumination on past negative experiences. (5)

There is much research to show that Minority Stress negatively affects health outcomes for LGBT people.
Promote social change
Promote Social Change

As providers, we need to go beyond advocacy and also support the LGBTQ+ 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 LGBTQ+ causes if we are able to. Fostering social change is an important part of our work and may even be a part of your ethical guidelines.
Trauma Responsive
Be Trauma Responsive

Our LGBTQ+ clients frequently have a history of trauma. If they don’t have family or attachment trauma they certainly have traumas from their lived experiences in an unsafe world. We must recognize the traumatic effects of discrimination and work with clients to resolve their traumatic experiences. We also need to have the understanding that living in an unsafe world is part of their reality and it will affect how they process trauma as it is often ongoing.
resources
Footnotes

(1) Wikipedia Link accessed April 25, 2017


(3) Wikipedia Link accessed July 7, 2020


(5) Wikipedia Link accessed July 7, 2020
References


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