

INFORMATION SHEET:

Tips for psychologists working with LGBTQI+ people and communities

Building the capacity of psychologists to work effectively with LGBTQI+ clients is very important, and particularly so in the aftermath of the marriage equality postal survey and debates in Parliament. Whilst the passing of marriage equality legislation in Australia is an extremely welcome outcome, the damaging nature of the debate and the campaigning it involved has been detrimental to the health and wellbeing of many LGBTQI+ people and families. A number of agencies reported an increased demand for psychological support services from members of the LGBTQI+ community.

This document is not a formal set of clinical guidelines; there are already APS resources for this. Rather, this is a collection of tips developed by professionals working with LGBTQI+ during the time of the marriage law postal survey in Australia. The following advice is designed to help psychologists to provide sensitive care to members of the LGBTQI+ community and their families, particularly in the aftermath of the survey and subsequent parliamentary vote in support of marriage equality.

Create a welcoming and inclusive environment in your organisation or practice

- Have books in your waiting rooms that represent diverse family structures.
- Display LGBTQI+ inclusive signs on your website and in waiting rooms.
- Display posters or other signs indicating that you support all people and families being treated equally in the law, and having the same options and rights, regardless of gender and/or sexuality.
- Use inclusive language and questions on your intake forms and signage. For example, use Parent/s, or Parent 1 and Parent 2, rather than Mother and Father; offer more gender identity options than just male and female (e.g. 'Other', or leave it open).
- Use language and ask questions in a way that indicates that you don't assume all people are heterosexual or identify with the sex and gender they were assigned when they were born.
- If you use genograms, do so in a sensitive and inclusive way.
- Use open-ended questions.
- Use the terms and pronouns clients use themselves.

Develop a reflective practice around working with LGBTQI+ clients

We all grow up with prejudices, and it is important to regularly check in, acknowledge and address them. Heterosexual norms still predominate in our society and these can give rise to negative attitudes towards LGBTQI+ people. All of us are susceptible to taking on these negative attitudes to differing extents.

- Notice the language you use yourself, and the assumptions you make.
- If you do not identify or are unfamiliar with the LGBTQI+ community, take time to educate yourself about some of their customs as well as the healthcare issues they face, including health disparities.
- Consider whether you or your colleagues would benefit from any related additional resources, professional development, and/or supervision.
- Ask yourself how well your workplace is doing in terms of gender diversity and inclusiveness, and take steps to develop your workplace and practice to ensure that it is inclusive.
- Be a leader in your workplace and challenge others' assumptions and negative attitudes.

Be sensitive to the lasting effects of the period around the marriage equality postal survey and debate in Parliament on LGBTQI+ clients and their families

- Even though the Marriage Equality Legislation has now been passed, and people in the LGBTQI+ (and wider) community are relieved and pleased, many may also be left with feelings of hurt, sadness and anger they experienced along the way.
- Anticipate that your clients and their family members, and particularly their children, might have experienced more stress and distress than usual in the context of public campaigns in the lead up to and immediately after the survey, and debate in Parliament.
- Use sensitive questions to ask how your clients are going.
- Some may not recognise why they are feeling an increase in distress or stress, and haven't related it to any increased hostility and prejudice arising from the postal survey campaigns.
- Help your clients to acknowledge how they are feeling, normalise these feelings, and discuss good self-care with your clients.
- Good self-care could include clients having a break from media stories about the debate, spending time with people who love and care for them, talking about how they feel, or staying involved in positive activities.
- Recognise that LGBTQI+ people face frequent harassment and discrimination from young ages, and that this can lead to poorer mental health outcomes and to risk-taking behaviour that increases the likelihood of physical harm.

- Remember that young people who identify as LGBTQI+ are at increased risk of suicidal ideation and self-harm, particularly when they experience prejudice, disrespect or discrimination based on their sexual or gender identity.
- Anticipate that children and young people might be at higher risk of being bullied or victimised in the current climate for being gay, lesbian, or transgender, or in a family with same-sex parents. Discuss with them ways in which they can feel supported and enhance their safety.
- Encourage clients to stay connected with their social networks and supportive friends and family members.
- Point to the resilience of clients and the LGBTQI+ community. Despite having faced different struggles, communities have shown themselves to be strong. This message in particular may need to be reinforced for younger people for whom such struggles may be new and hurtful.
- Don't assume all LGBTQI+ people will now want to get married, or that the efforts to gain marriage equality were all about marriage. For many it was about having the same rights as the rest of the community, and clients may be sensitive to being constantly questioned about 'when they are getting married' as this may reinforce feelings that their relationship continues to be under public scrutiny (as it was during the postal survey).

Keep yourself informed

- Keep abreast of the social science research and use this information to empower your clients. For example, international research clearly shows that children growing up with same-sex parents do at least as well as children with heterosexual parents on psychological, social and educational measures. What's important is to have a family that loves and cares for you (regardless of their gender or sexual orientation).
- Identify community resources which may be helpful for LGBTQI+ clients and their families.
- The APS has an evidence-supported [LGBTQI+ issues](#) information page. Share these links and have them added to your own workplace's equity and wellbeing support and resources pages.
- APS members can also contact the [APS Diverse Genders, Bodies and Sexualities Interest Group](#) for more information.
- Other resources to assist mental health practitioners to work well with LGBTQI+ people and family members are available at:
 - https://www.bouverie.org.au/images/uploads/Bouverie_Centre_Guidelines_for_working_with_Same_Sex_Parented_Families.pdf
 - <http://www.lgbtihealth.org.au/sites/default/files/practice-wisdom-guide-online.pdf>