

INFORMATION SHEET:

Tips for psychologists working with LGBTQI+ people and communities during the marriage equality debate

There is a lot of discussion at the moment - in the media, in the community and in people's homes - about marriage equality. While polls show that, for about a decade, the majority of Australians have been supporting marriage equality, some people oppose it on ideological or religious grounds, or because it seems like a major change from what they are used to.

The proposed marriage law postal vote means that groups will be campaigning to sway the electorate to their position. It is critically important that the postal vote and accompanying campaigns are conducted respectfully and fairly; there is a real risk that they will lead to an increase in hate speech, fear campaigning, and the perpetuation of hurtful and harmful stereotyping and negative attitudes towards LGBTQI+ people, family members, and communities¹.

Already in Australia, since the postal vote was announced, a number of agencies have reported an increased demand for psychological support services from members of the LGBTQI+ community. The following advice is designed to help psychologists working with members of the LGBTQI+ community and their families to provide sensitive care, particularly during this potentially distressing time leading up to the postal vote.

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.

¹ Research on the impacts of the 'NO Equality' campaign in Ireland in 2015 (which arose during Ireland's marriage equality referendum) indicated that it had numerous negative psychological and social effects on individuals and families. Young LGBTQI+ people, and the children of LGBTQI+ people, found it particularly distressing and stressful, but the negative effects were also experienced by older adults, people in rural and regional areas, and single heterosexual parents. Distress was particularly experienced in relation to hearing negative views expressed by family members, friends and colleagues, and seeing posters and television advertisements negatively portraying LGBTQI+ people and their families as deficient or not positive and safe for children.

- 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.
- 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.

Be sensitive to the effects of the postal vote and related campaigns on LGBTQI+ clients and their families

- Anticipate that your clients and their family members, and particularly their children, might be experiencing more stress and distress than usual in the context of public campaigns in the lead up to and immediately after the vote.
- Use sensitive questions to ask how your clients are going during this time.
- 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 vote 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.
- Encourage clients to log off social media if posts become distressing, or to consider managing feeds to block hateful posts.
- 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.

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.
- Educate yourself about some of the customs within the LGBTQI+ community, 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.

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).
- Keep up to date with progress of the postal vote and related media commentary.
- Identify community resources which may be helpful for LGBTQI+ clients and their families.
- The APS has developed a new webpage dedicated to the psychological issues around [Marriage Equality](#), in addition to its existing 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>