



Counseling Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender Youth

Don't automatically assume your clients are heterosexual.

Whether you know it or not, you have already worked with clients who are gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender (GLBT). They may simply not have felt safe revealing this information to you.

You cannot tell whether someone is straight or gay just by looking at them.

Many people wrongly assume that gay men and lesbians can be easily identified based on their mannerisms, way of talking, dressing, or cutting their hair. However, the gender atypical person is just as likely to be straight as gay. The cheerleader or star football player could be gay. Likewise, gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people come from many racial, socio-economic, religious and political backgrounds. They hold many different views about relationships, sex, marriage, feminism, politics and religion. They dress and cut their hair in many different ways. Try not to make assumptions about your client based on stereotypes.

Use inclusive language. Be accepting and open.

Try to use non-specific pronouns when talking about clients' partners, until they mention the gender of their partner (boyfriend, girlfriend) themselves. Even if a client mentions a partner of the opposite sex, don't assume that your client is straight or never has same-sex relationships. He or she could be bisexual, questioning his or her sexual identity, or covering a gay or lesbian identity. If clients do not specify their partner's gender, this may mean they are not comfortable disclosing their sexual orientation to you. Continue using inclusive language. Try to communicate an open and accepting attitude. In time, they may feel comfortable coming out to you.

Use the vocabulary the youth uses.

If your client uses the word "homosexual," follow his or her lead. Likewise, if he or she says "gay" or "lesbian," use that term. Do not use such terms unless the youth does first. Many youth, including those who have had homosexual experiences, are confused or uncertain about their sexual orientation, and have not identified as gay, lesbian or bisexual. If the youth appears uneasy with other vocabulary, use neutral terms such as "same sex feeling" or "sex with a wo/man." Let your client tell you how he or she is most comfortable being identified.

Remember that behavior does not equal identity (and vice versa).

Sexual behavior and sexual identity are two different things. Just because someone engages in sexual behavior with someone of the same sex does not necessarily mean they identify as gay or lesbian. Likewise, a person who identifies as gay or lesbian may not be sexually active, may have partners of the same sex, partners of the opposite sex, or both. Avoid using labels that don't give you an accurate description of behavior. In assessing risk, ask about behavior.

Be supportive of clients who identify as heterosexual but are attracted to people of the same sex.

Because of the stigma attached to homosexuality, people who experience an attraction to or have sexual relationships with individuals of the same sex often do not self-identify as lesbian or gay. If a client is scared of his or her attraction to someone of the same sex, do not try to convince or reassure him or her that they are

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Counseling (Continued)

straight — however well-intentioned, this only adds to the stigma around homosexuality. Help your clients explore their own feelings and provide support. Your clients will eventually reach their own conclusions.

Be willing to explore sexual orientation.

Confusion, uncertainty, embarrassment and cognitive dissonance are all likely to be experienced by the person struggling with his or her sexual or gender identity.

Understand that this dissonance is an expected part of coming to terms with a gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender identity. Be willing to engage your client in dialogue about this dissonance and support your client in clarifying his or her feelings about sexual orientation.

Maintain confidentiality.

As with all clients, confidentiality is extremely important. You must keep a client's sexual orientation confidential. If you "out" your client (tell someone directly or indirectly that they are gay) you could put them in jeopardy of losing family and friends, being abused or assaulted, or experiencing numerous other problems. Do not "out" your client to anyone, especially in the legal or medical system or to their family members, unless your client has given you specific permission to do so.

When dealing with youth, it is especially important to protect confidentiality with respect to their parents knowing that they are gay. Many young people have been kicked out of their homes, abused, even raped by parents who could not accept their homosexuality. A well-meaning disclosure could put a young person at risk. Discuss with the youth the pros and cons of coming out to their parents, and respect their decision.

Support you client with their decisions about "coming out."

In every new situation and with each new person, people who identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender must decide whether or not to reveal their sexual or gender orientation. Be aware of this and support a client in however "out" they feel they can be in a particular situation. Your clients may need time and space to make these decisions because of the large impact coming out can have on their lives.

Educate yourself and provide accurate information.

Gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people — as well as those questioning their sexual or gender identity — often believe the same myths and stereotypes as society at large. Providing them with accurate information that dispels myths about what it means to be gay can lessen their sense of isolation and shame. Accurate information is also important when working with families, to assure them that they are not to "blame" for their child's sexual or gender orientation. Read books, attend seminars and workshops, and become aware of resources in your community.

Be aware of the attitudes toward and stereotypes you may hold concerning gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people.

Be aware of your own homophobia and how it affects your work with clients of any sexual orientation. Perhaps you know that your level of acceptance of homosexuality is not where you want it to be. Keep working on it! Such awareness is crucial, as it allows you to take extra care not to let your personal feelings interfere with effective, non-judgemental counseling of your clients.

If you view homosexuality and bisexuality as "sinful," "sick," "unnatural," and/or something to be changed, you should consider referring gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender clients to another staff person or agency that can more comfortably handle the needs of such clients. Do not add pain resulting from your judgements about homosexuality to what the youth is already experiencing.

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