

APA Division 44 Public Policy Committee

The Public Policy Committee of APA's Division 44 aims to help shape the political landscape to improve well-being for all LGBTQ+ people. This committee responds to political and policy issues related to LGBTQ+ people and provides information and materials grounded in psychological science to help interested psychologists, government officials, and other people to navigate the tensions arising between individual/community well-being and public policy.

Definitions

Sexual Orientation: Describes patterns of romantic, emotional, and/or sexual attraction toward persons who are men, women, and/or nonbinary.

Gender Identity: A person's internal sense of themselves as a man, a woman, or any other gender.

Gender Expression: The way a person communicates their gender identity to others through clothing, hairstyles, jewelry, makeup, and other behaviors.

Transgender: An umbrella term used to describe people whose gender identity or gender expression do not conform to what is typically associated with the sex they were assigned at birth.

Cisgender: A person whose gender identity and expression align with the sex they were assigned at birth.

Facts about "Conversion Therapy"

Conversion therapy" is NOT therapy.

"Conversion therapy" describes any attempt to change a person's sexual orientation or gender identity or expression, or any component of these. It is sometimes called reparative therapy, reorientation therapy, sexual orientation change efforts, or gender identity change efforts. Proponents have rebranded the practice and adapted their claims about it over time in response to sustained critiques. Same-gender or -sex attraction, gender non-conformity, and identifying as a sexual or gender minority (e.g., being lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, another sexual or gender minority; LGBTQ+) are not illnesses and do not need treatment. These practices are not "therapy."

Many who offer change efforts are not licensed mental health practitioners. This makes it difficult to monitor their practices. Researchers estimate that around 350,000 U.S. adults received "conversion therapy" as adolescents.¹ An estimated 16,000 youth will undergo "conversion therapy" by a mental health professional before they reach age 18 compared with an estimated 57,000 that will undergo it from a religious or spiritual advisor.¹ These change efforts can occur in many settings, including medical facilities and campuses, with spiritual advisors as well as individual or family meetings.

Research finds change efforts do not work and are harmful.

Reviews of research on change efforts can be found at the links on the left. The APA Task Force on Appropriate Therapeutic Responses to Sexual Orientation found "there is insufficient evidence that [sexual orientation change efforts] are efficacious for changing sexual orientation. Furthermore, there is some evidence that such efforts cause harm" (p. 66). Further, experts at the U.S. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration agree that change efforts are "coercive, can be harmful, and should not be part of behavioral health treatment."

Reviewing the literature reveals some important points about these change efforts, listed below. Most studies focused on sexual orientation.

- Change efforts were not effective when changing sexual orientation was identified as the goal.^{2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7}
- Although people going through change efforts may report or appear to show changes in their behavior, there is no scientific evidence that change efforts reduce sexual attraction⁶ or change gender identity. Change efforts may encourage people to hide their sexual orientation or gender identity,⁸ and can lead to other problems such as depression, sexual problems, and low self-esteem.^{4, 7}
- Change efforts are harmful during adolescence, and can increase suicidal thoughts, suicide attempts, and depression in young adulthood.⁹ Involvement of mental health or religious providers in change efforts is related to *even more* depression and suicidality.^{4, 10}

[Click the Links Below for More Information](#)

[Research Reviews](#)

APA's Appropriate Therapeutic Responses to Sexual Orientation

Ending Conversion Therapy: Supporting and Affirming LGBTQ Youth

Cornell University's "What we Know" Research Overview

[Advocacy Resources](#)

Human Rights Campaign State Maps of Laws and Policies

National Center for Lesbian Rights Facts about Conversion Therapy

Policy and Position Statements on Conversion Therapy

50 Bills 50 States from the Trevor Project

Mental health associations warn against change efforts.

Every major mental health organization has issued warnings about the risk of dangers associated with change efforts. A consensus statement issued in 2015 by the U.S. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (see link at left margin) maintains that being LGBTQ+ is not a mental disorder, points to lack of evidence that change efforts can alter sexual orientation or gender and considers change efforts inappropriate. Further, the statement warns that change efforts may be harmful. This issue is particularly important for youth, who have fewer legal protections because they are minors.

These change efforts stigmatize LGBTQ+ people and change efforts/ and stigma can increase minority stress, or stress that comes from invalidation, non-acceptance, and enacted discrimination. Greater minority stress is related to greater risk of depression, substance abuse, and suicide, among other problems, as documented by the Institute of Medicine.¹¹

How can we advocate to end these change efforts?

It is important to challenge stigma and to take active steps toward supporting LGBTQ+ people. Here are some ways that you can help:

- Urge your elected officials to support legislation that will prohibit licensed mental health professionals from using "conversion therapy" or change efforts. Such legislation may be at the federal, state, or local level. As of June 2019, 18 states have acted laws to protect minors from "conversion therapy."
- Support policies that end discriminatory practices in your community.
- Urge elected officials to pass consumer protection laws that protect the public against these change efforts.
- Advocate for access to accurate information regarding LGBTQ+ individuals, as well as change efforts. This helps challenge harmful attitudes and stigma.
- Reach out to your state, provincial, or territorial psychological association and/or your state equality organization to join ongoing work to promote well-being for people of all sexual orientations and gender identities, including LGBTQ+ people.

References

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- ²Flentje, A., Heck, N.C., & Cochran, B.N. (2013). Sexual reorientation therapy interventions: Perspectives of ex-ex-gay individuals. *Journal of Gay and Lesbian Mental Health, 17*(3), 256-277.
- ³Weiss, E.M., Morehouse, J., Yeager, T., & Berry, T. (2010). A qualitative study of ex-gay and ex-ex-gay experiences. *Journal of Gay and Lesbian Mental Health, 14*(4), 291-319.
- ⁴Beckstead, A.L., & Morrow, S.L. (2004). Mormon clients' experiences of conversion therapy: The need for a new treatment approach. *The Counseling Psychologist, 32*(5), 651-690.
- ⁵Dehlin, J.P., Galliher, R.V., Bradshaw, W.S., Hyde, D.C., & Crowell, K.A. (2015). Sexual orientation change efforts among current or former LDS church members. *Journal of Counseling Psychology, 62*(2), 95-105.
- ⁶Maccio, E. (2011). Self-reported sexual orientation and identity before and after sexual reorientation therapy. *Journal of Gay and Lesbian Mental Health, 15*(3), 242-259.
- ⁷Haldeman, D.C. (2001). Therapeutic antidotes: Helping gay and bisexual men recover from conversion therapy. *Journal of Gay and Lesbian Psychotherapy, 5*(3/4), 117-130.
- ⁸Fjelstrom, J. (2013). Sexual orientation change efforts and the search for authenticity. *Journal of Homosexuality, 60*(6), 801-827.
- ⁹Ryan, C., Toomey, R.B., Diaz, R.M., & Russell, S.T. (2018). Parent-initiated sexual orientation change efforts with LBT Adolescents: Implications for young adult mental health and adjustment. *Journal of Homosexuality* (advanced online publication), doi: 10.1080/00918369.2018.1538407
- ¹⁰Borowich, A. (2008). Failed reparative therapy of orthodox Jewish homosexuals. *Journal of Gay and Lesbian Mental Health, 12*(3), 167-177.
- ¹¹Institute of Medicine. (2011). The health of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people: Building a foundation for better understanding. Washington, DC: National Academies Press.