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The Alphabet Community: Who We Are and What We Need From You

**By: Dave Hingsburger
Virginia Jahyu
Luke Lynn
Ayodele Moffett**

The debate was getting heated, and one of the panelists was flustered and looking for a word to describe, with some disgust, the LGBT+ community; eventually the phrase, “That Alphabet Community” popped out. What he said in anger and disgust is something that we, as authors of this article, and as differing letters in that alphabet, embrace. The idea that a community aims to be one community built out of many communities is kind of beautiful don’t you think?

Striving to include, while recognizing differences is a worthy goal. It ensures that there are many voices that need to be heard, and many viewpoints to be considered.

That being the case, we need to be transparent with our goals for this article. Firstly, we are going to give you a glossary of terms that make up ‘the alphabet:’ “LGBTQQ2SIAAP.” This glossary will give only a brief definition of what each letter means. We will be adding in a few words not in the alphabet, which are routinely used by people when discussing issues related to being LGBTQ+. This part of the article serves only as the backdrop for the real work we want to do. It should be stated that our definitions are from our perspectives and not necessarily exactly as someone else would define them.

Secondly, and most importantly, we are going to give you, as a direct support professional (DSP), some suggestions for supporting a person with a disability who is also a member of the LGBT+ community (look up intersectionality in the glossary), or if someone comes out to you as such. Further, we are going to give you some suggestions as to why you may be supporting people with intellectual disabilities in an agency where ‘that isn’t an issue here.’ So that being said, let’s start with the glossary:

**Editors: Dave Hingsburger, M.Ed.
Angie Nethercott, M.A., RP**



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Gay: The word can be confusing because it has two meanings. Within the LGBT+ community it is most commonly used for men who have affectional and sexual relationships with other men. It is also sometimes used as an alternate to ‘LGBT+’ when speaking of the community itself. People may also choose to use ‘gay’ when coming out and leave the explaining of exactly what that means until later. In our context here, we are using it in reference to affectional and sexual relationships between men.

Lesbian: A lesbian is a woman who is affectionally and sexually attracted to other women.

Bisexual: A bisexual person is someone who loves and is sexually attracted to another person, regardless of gender.

Transgender: Transgender is when a person’s gender identity or gender expression is different than their sex at birth. In other words, their gender doesn’t match their sex at birth. Someone who is born female for example may identify as a male and live their life as male. Being transgender and expressing your gender, when it goes against societal expectations and cultural norms takes a lot of courage, and often comes with many complex feelings and experiences.

Transsexual: Transgender and transsexual are often confused and seen as being similar, but some people see it as being very different. The term transgender is based on the psychological identity and expressions of genders, whereas being transsexual is about the physical body and/or sex matching their gender identity. People who are transsexual seek medical treatments to permanently transition their physical body to match their gender.

Transitioning is when a person who is transgender or transsexual is going through the process to change their gender.

Being transgender or transsexual is different from sexual orientation. Someone who is transgender or transsexual can identify their sexuality as LGBT or not want their sexuality labelled at all.

Queer: The word queer has many different meanings. “Queer” was originally used as a derogatory term against people seen as “strange,” “peculiar,” or who liked same-sex relationships. Many in the LGBT community now use “queer” as an empowering term that is used to embrace all sexual and gender differences. However, historical words of oppression created to cause hurt and pain may never be embraced by some, particularly those who were wounded by those words. “Queer” is a word that, at this point, should only be used by someone within the alphabet community, and people’s wishes about the use of that word need to be respected.

Intersectionality: None of us have just one identity. Intersectionality refers to the interaction of social identities within marginalized social groups. For people with disabilities, it may well be that someone is at the intersection of disability and sexuality; that intersection can become more complex when gender, race, and other social identities are included. As you know, for people with intellectual disabilities, sexuality and sexual identities can cause both discomfort and harsh punishment within the systems in which they live.

Cisgendered: Being comfortable within yourself because your gender of birth matches your gender identity.

Ally: An ally recognizes the unearned privileges they have and takes action on changing society's pattern of injustice. An ally is critical of how society is shaped and is dedicated to understanding how people are affected by the community, country, and culture in which they exist. Being an ally also means being aware of your own experiences of oppression - this leads to empathy and understanding of the people you support.

Pansexual: *Pan* is the Greek prefix for "all." Pansexual is a term that refers to folks who are attracted to all sex and gender identities.

Many people get bisexuality and pansexuality mixed up. To clarify, bisexuality refers to the attraction of binary gendered peoples (men and women), whereas pansexuality suggests the possibility of attraction to a spectrum of gender identities (2 Spirit, gender-fluid, trans, women and men).

2 Spirit: A term used by some North American Indigenous societies to describe people with diverse gender identities, expressions, roles, and sexual orientations. 2 spirit people identify with having both a masculine and feminine spirit, and often use plural pronouns such as 'they' and 'them.' This term describes the third gender and is used by and for indigenous peoples.

In other parts of the world people who have diverse gender identities include the "Hijras" in India and the "Fa'afafine" in Polynesia, just to name a few.

Intersexed: Intersexuality is a general term that happens when a person is born with sexual anatomy that doesn't seem to fit the typical expectations of female or male genitalia. For example, a child may be born with a noticeably large clitoris, or lacking a vaginal opening, and another child may be born with a notably small penis, or with a scrotum that is divided so that it is formed more like labia.

This glossary was simply to get you ready for the important part of the article. Yes, knowing what the words mean is important, but treating the people who identify with any of these words with respect and even tenderness is more important. This is particularly true when you are the power in a power-based relationship. Who you are matters, what you do, and what you say matters. You have the power to not only hurt but destroy and, therefore, you need to recognize some moments for what they are – a test of your character and your capacity for compassion.

Think of it this way, if a person with a disability comes to you to tell you that they are 'Gay,' or any other of the identities we've discussed, they have done so because they believe in you, they believe you will listen, they believe you will help them, they believe they are safe with you. THEY CHOSE YOU. As adults, we can forget the vulnerability that someone can feel when revealing a personal truth or belief. We've all heard stories of LGBT+ people telling their parents, people whose love they trusted, and being kicked out of their home, and out of arms of affection. There is risk. Huge risk. And they chose you because they trust you and believe you will not hurt them. So, to begin with, to end with, don't.

Many years ago, a lesbian staff at a day program was approached by a woman with an intellectual disability and was asked if they could chat together. Having no idea what was going to happen, she sat down with the woman with a disability and listened. The woman with a disability came out to her, saying that she thought that she was the only staff who wouldn't yell at her.

She was wrong. The lesbian staff roared her disapproval of her sexuality, told her it was wrong and immoral, told her that she was going to go to hell. Further, she told her that a meeting would be called, and her parents informed. It was a strong, harsh, punitive action that lacked in professional ethics in almost every possible way.

But she was lesbian, why would she do this? The staff was terrified. She was deeply in the closet, and with reason. The agency had a policy that LGBT+ people were not welcome as staff within the agency; she knew her job was on the line. Further, she knew that there was already talk about her, she'd heard the whispered gossip. She felt that staff's suspicions would be confirmed if they saw her be kind and supportive to the woman with a disability. Her reactions were anger that she'd been put in this situation by the woman with a disability, as well as fear that anything less than full condemnation would lead to the eventual loss of her job.

Sometimes it's difficult; there may be people reading this article who work in agencies where LGBT+ staff or people supported are not welcome. This is easy to say and hard to do, but kindness is always just kindness and is easily explained. You don't reveal anything about your identity through kindness; you only reveal your character.

A staff at an in-service training on sexuality stated that, "In my country, they kill homosexuals and that's alright by me." That statement caused real concern for the trainer who brought it forward to supervisors within the organization. In discussing this, the trainer was told that the woman was presently supporting a gay man with a disability and doing so very well and that, in the past, had supported a lesbian woman when she came out, again doing a good job. The trainer spoke to the staff and asked how she was able to support people who she clearly believes are unworthy. She said simply that she believes what she believes at home, but she is at work and, at work, she follows the policy of the agency, and she sees no conflict.

Again, it's important to remember that you are paid to do what you do. It's important to remember that your employer, the person with a disability, has a right to dignified and supportive approaches by those who provide service. It's their times and their needs that matter.

So let's look at some things you can do when someone comes out to you.

What to do when you are told or are asked to support someone who is out or comes out:

- Listen to the person, treat them like an expert in their experience, and stay curious (not nosy). Make a statement such as, "I'm honoured that you shared that with me."
- Be prepared to learn the unique stories and experiences of that individual.
- Don't explain away their experiences and tell them they aren't real, or that they meant nothing. Someone reporting that they were called anti-gay names needs to be supported, not corrected. If it mattered to them, if it hurt them, then it needs to be heard and acknowledged, possibly by saying, "I'm sorry that happened to you."
- Do not "out someone." This refers to revealing another person's sexual orientation or trans/gender identity/status without their permission.
- Remember that one person from the LGBTQ+ community does not represent the whole community. Because your LGBTQ+ friend loves to party doesn't mean that the person you support does too.
- If you are interested in learning more about LGBTQ+, do it! The internet can be a useful resource.
- Allow yourself to be challenged about your preconceptions and ideas about sexuality, this can sometimes lead to new understandings.

- Research local, international, and global LGBTQ+ agencies and organizations for further resources to offer the person you are supporting.
- Stay caught up on the issues that are important to the communities you want to support.
- LGBTQ+ labels are self-identified and **not** assigned. Each individual has the right to change their labels and identity as they see fit.
- It's okay to have judgements, just recognize that that's what they are - *judgements*. Not to be mistaken for *truth*.
- With mistakes, comes learning. If you use the wrong pronoun to address someone, or get called-out for something ... listen, apologize, learn from it, and move forward. It's about the impact of your words and action – not the intent.
- If you are unsure and recognize a challenge in working with an individual from the LGBTQ+ community, speak to your supervisor. There is no shame in understanding what your limitations are. You may have more to (un)learn, most of us do. Gaps in knowledge can affect compassion and allyship.

Now here's an interesting question: What if no one has ever 'come out' in your agency? What if it doesn't seem that there are any LGBTQ+ around? If you believe the signs in the pride marches, "We are everywhere!" there should be staff or people you support who have identified themselves. Shouldn't there?

The first question you need to ask is, "Have we created a welcoming and safe atmosphere?" Then comes the more personal questions, "Have I used words, or made jokes, or participated in some way with anti-LGBTQ+ messaging?" That's a hard one because it means looking at you and your behaviour from the point of view of someone who is looking for someone to trust.

You need to be prepared that someone is watching you, and watching the interactions of the staff. *"I remember the conversations in kitchens, staff rooms, van trips, and while watching the news and comments on lgbtq issues would start. I was often the hidden figure, the one with the story no one knew, the secret reporter, the lgbtq spy, who got the real scoop about how you really felt about gay people. Often time, the real story was of disgust, shame and judgement. Understanding, empathy, sympathy was rare in those moments."* You are seen. You are heard.

So, what to do when no one seems to be a member of the LGBTQ+ community?

- Use inclusive language that promotes a friendly environment for all peoples, even if there are no visible / identified LGBTQ+ peoples. (No "Those pants are really faggy," and "That's so gay" please!)
- Don't just say you are inclusive, be inclusive. Offer, share, and go to events that are for the LGBTQ+ community, even if you don't support anyone who has identified being in this community. Pride is a fun festival where everyone is invited.
- You may not ask someone about their sexuality, but you can work to be seen as safe, and you can be ready to be supportive. Trust is an important factor to establish prior to anyone sharing their sexual and gender identity.
- Critically think about what you know about the LGBTQ+ community, clearly differentiating what you *know* and what you *think*. Challenge what you think. Keep coming back to this.

- Speak up when you see injustice; safe atmospheres are created by courageous people. Standing against racist, sexist, homophobic or ableist language and attitudes is a difficult thing to do. But if you want a place that's welcoming, it has to be built attitude by attitude.
- When someone with a disability speaks their truth, never speak over them or explain for them. This is their moment, let them have it.
- It's impossible to learn, if you're not willing to listen.
- Do not make assumptions - when you do this, you're leaving curiosity behind. Walk with curiosity ... it usually is accompanied by kindness.
- If you are a member of the LGBTQ+ community, and you feel safe to do so, come out at work. The single most effective change-agent for prejudice is simply meeting a person who is different from you. This is not easy, but it may be the best gift you can give to others who are oppressed, and who need to have a role model in order to be able to take a step towards the door of their closet.

Summary

Our job is to create community. We know that. But sometimes we need to recognize that there is more than one community. People with disabilities are a diverse community. We are all the same because we are all different. Disability, however, means that, because of your need for the help of another, your life can become one where you never feel really safe to be who you really are. It's our job as DSPs to ensure that, around each one of us, we communicate the simple message: "We won't hurt you." And then. We don't.

About the Authors

Dave Hingsburger, M.Ed., who identifies as a gay man, and who uses the pronouns he/him, is the Director of Clinical and Educational Services at Vita Community Living Services. Dave lectures internationally and has published several books and articles in reference to disability. He provides training to staff, parents, and people with disabilities regarding sexuality, abuse prevention, self-esteem, and behavioural approaches. He has developed 'Disability-Informed Therapy' as part of his work towards creating safe spaces for people with disabilities to live and work.

Virginia Jahyu, M.A., EXAT (she, her) is a queer, East-Asian, second-generation Canadian settler, intersectional-feminist, artist, and expressive arts therapist. She is a clinician at the Trauma to Trust Clinic offered by Vita Community Living Services and holds a master's degree in Expressive Arts Therapy. Virginia's passion for the arts, accessibility, and equity continues to guide her work.

Luke Lynn, BSc is a Manager of Services and Supports with Kerry's Place Autism Services. Luke started his career working with youth who have mental health issues and has now worked with adults in the developmental sector for over 13 years. Luke was born female and lives his life as a straight male. His interests lie in ensuring people in minority groups, specifically people with disabilities who are part of the LGBT community, have equal opportunities and are able to be active members in their communities. He led the first agency supporting adults with developmental disabilities to march in the Pride Toronto parade, co-founded sprOUT Toronto, and developed and changed policies to promote "safe spaces."

Ayodele Moffett, BA, who identifies as a lesbian, was born and raised in Toronto, and her parents are first generation Canadians from Guyana. Ayodele has over 12 years of experience working with children, adolescents and adults with intellectual and physical disabilities, Autism Spectrum Disorder and Pervasive Developmental Disorders, Mental Health concerns, and Addictions. Ayodele holds a diploma in Law Enforcement and a bachelor's degree in Behavioural Science. She is currently working as a Behavioural Therapist with Vita Community Living Services.

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