

A Guide to Improving Safety in Pastoral Care with LGBTQA+ People



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Introduction

This resource provides guidelines for safer pastoral care with lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer/questioning, asexual and other people with diverse sexual and gender identities (LGBTQA+). The guidelines are based on our research with LGBTQA+ people about their experiences of pastoral care, reported in *Healing Spiritual Harms*.ⁱ It has been produced for use by pastoral care workers and faith leaders from all religious or spiritual backgrounds.ⁱⁱ

Religious communities have a range of beliefs, rules and attitudes related to gender and sexual diversity. This resource is designed to be useful in your community and for you to be able to apply the guidelines consistently with your beliefs, traditions and rules concerning sexuality, gender identity and sexual behaviour. Its aim is to increase your capacity to provide safe pastoral care to the LGBTQA+ people in your community, their families, and their friends.

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Background

Most people in Australia today have a family member, friend, colleague, or acquaintance who is LGBTQA+. All faith communities are likely to include members who are same-sex attracted or gender diverse (that is, who do not identify with the gender people expected them to have when they were born).ⁱⁱⁱ LGBTQA+ people of faith, and their families, need you to be equipped to provide them with good pastoral support.

Unfortunately, research has shown that most pastoral care workers in Australia lack knowledge and confidence to support the spiritual and pastoral care needs of LGBTQA+ people. In one study, two thirds of pastoral workers said they were not confident to provide pastoral care related to gender and sexuality, more than with any other pastoral issue.^{iv} This is a major problem, both for LGBTQA+ people and for pastoral workers.

In the general population, LGBTQA+ people experience high rates of discrimination and stigmatisation, leading to high rates of mental ill health.^v Research has conclusively shown that it is LGBTQA+ people's experiences of discrimination that lead to poor health outcomes, not the fact that they are LGBTQA+.^{vi}

Poor pastoral care can contribute to and exacerbate LGBTQA+ people's experiences of discrimination and poor health outcomes. It can also damage a person's faith and sense of safety, connection and belonging in their religious and cultural communities.

With good pastoral care, faith and membership in a religious community can be key sources of protection and strength for LGBTQA+ people. This may be especially important when they become aware of their sexuality and gender identity, as well as in everyday life if they experience other forms of discrimination, such as racism or religious discrimination.^{vii}

The guidelines below distinguish between sexual and gender identities and behaviours. Thinking carefully about this distinction may show that common assumptions about LGBTQA+ identities—a person's internal sense of self—are not actually based in the core beliefs and traditions of your faith.^{viii} Your faith's messaging may only be about behaviours. Having and accepting an LGBTQA+ identity is unlikely to prevent someone from complying with your religion's rules for sexual and gender behaviour. Recognising this may open new avenues for pastoral care with LGBTQA+ people.

Some people assume that if a person has an LGBTQA+ identity, they cannot live or exist in a way that is compatible with their faith or community. Some people think that having an LGBTQA+ identity is caused by negative life experiences or events; that LGBTQA+ people are somehow broken in their sexuality or gender identity; or that people can or should change or suppress their LGBTQA+ identity.^{ix} Such attempts are not based in scientific or medical evidence, do not work, and can be extremely harmful.

Some religious communities have rules for behaviour that do not permit same-sex sexual activity, or that limit the expression of transgender or gender diverse identities. These rules could be applied in ways that are harmful to LGBTQA+ people, however, they can also be applied in ways that minimise the risk of harm.

The guidelines explain how safer pastoral care can be provided to LGBTQA+ people in ways that align with the current rules and values of your community. We hope that improved understanding of the core dynamics of safe LGBTQA+ pastoral care, expressed through these guidelines, will assist you as pastoral workers and faith leaders from diverse communities to grow in confidence to support your LGBTQA+ members.

Research has conclusively shown that it is LGBTQA+ people's experiences of discrimination that lead to poor health outcomes, not the fact that they are LGBTQA+



Guidelines

The following guidelines provide principles and ethics of pastoral practice aimed at avoiding the kinds of religious trauma and psychological injury documented in our report, *Healing Spiritual Harms*. They frame the principles of safe LGBTQA+ pastoral care in generic terms, not specific to any particular religious tradition. As you read them, consider the best ways that these principles could be applied in your own faith community.

1. Recognise

In the diversity of human experience, some people are same-sex attracted or have a gender that is different to the gender people assumed when they were born. This is a fact that needs to be recognised and accepted in pastoral care with people who are, or think they might be, LGBTQA+. For some communities, this might be a challenging fact to accept. However, we know from decades of medical, scientific, and psychological research that a person's sexual orientation and gendered sense of self cannot be changed or reoriented through pastoral or psychological interventions.^x

Practices that claim to change a person's sexual orientation or gender identity, in fact, only suppress that part of a person. We know that these practices are often based in unfounded ideas that LGBTQA+ people's inner experiences of gender and sexuality are caused by adverse childhood, developmental or spiritual experiences. These ideas are often blended with pseudoscience and discredited theories of human psychology and communicated to LGBTQA+ people in pastoral contexts.

Spreading such misinformation about sexuality and gender or refusing to accept the fact of a person's sexual orientation or gender identity may well cause them harm.^{xi} When key parts of a person, such as their faith and their sexuality or gender identity, are put in conflict and suppressed, extreme psychological distress can result.^{xii}

2. Protect

As a pastoral worker, you have a role to play as an advocate. If your community is spreading misinformation about gender and sexuality, or telling LGBTQA+ people that to be a member they are required to suppress their sexuality or gender identity, that will be harmful and unsafe for LGBTQA+ people in your community. LGBTQA+ people should be protected from such unsafe policies and practices.

In many places in Australia and around the world, attempts to change or suppress a person's LGBTQA+ identity are now against the law. Change or suppression practices also contravene the *Code of Ethics* of the Australian Psychological Society, the Psychotherapy and Counselling Association of Australia, and the guidelines of several faith based mental health bodies such as the Christian Counsellors Association of Australia.^{xiii} Good pastoral care includes doing your part to protect people from change or suppression practices.^{xiv}

3. Accept

Safe pastoral care for LGBTQA+ people involves supporting them to find a path where they can accept and hold in harmony their faith, their sexuality and gender, and their relationship with their religious community. An LGBTQA+ person should be supported to accept and affirm their sexual orientation and gender identity, and be supported to explore what possibilities there might be for expressing those aspects of themselves in relation to the rules and traditions of their faith and community.^{xv}

It is important that you are clear and unambiguous about your community's rules and limits on sexual and gendered behaviour.^{xvi} If you are not clear and honest about these rules and expectations, even in an attempt to be welcoming, you may cause LGBTQA+ people to feel deceived and betrayed if they are later confronted by unexpected boundaries. It is also important to be clear about the range of views and expectations about gender and sexuality that someone may encounter from others in your community.

Go out of your way to make sure that LGBTQA+ people are safe to explore the spaces and ways that they can be themselves in your community and religious tradition. Be aware that language is tied to safety for many people. Use language that invites people in and encourages relationship with your faith and community.

Supporting LGBTQA+ people in their journey of self-acceptance must involve recognising the whole person, including acknowledging any pain or sadness that may have been part of their journey in your community. Support the LGBTQA+ person in their own goals for finding peace with themselves, their faith and the community, rather than making assumptions about where they will or should end up.



If you are not clear and honest about these rules and expectations, even in an attempt to be welcoming, you may cause LGBTQA+ people to feel deceived and betrayed if they are later confronted by unexpected boundaries.

4. Explore

Sometimes people have uncertain feelings about their gender or sexual attractions. They may seek pastoral support to explore their faith in relation to such feelings when they emerge. Safe pastoral practice with such people involves supporting their exploration without predetermining any particular outcome for who they are. While your religious tradition will have rules about sexual and gender expression, it most likely also has space for a person to accept that they are same-sex attracted, asexual or have a gender identity other than what people assumed they would have when they were born.

Don't assume that someone exploring their LGBTQA+ identity in your community will need or want to 'come out' or be LGBTQA+ in a particular way. Be sure to respect their choice – it is their story to tell, not yours to share with others. You may be supportive, but 'outing' them could put them at risk from others. There are many ways that people find to accept and express their sexuality and gender identity in relation to the other important parts of themselves. Respect and use the language that the LGBTQA+ person uses about themselves and their identity.

Your task in providing safe LGBTQA+ pastoral care is to support a person who is questioning their sexuality and gender identity to explore where and how they might find a place of secure belonging in their faith and connection to their religious community. The process of exploring the ways someone can find to be their full authentic selves in your community may bring to the surface any number of difficult experiences. Be prepared to support the person in their journey to heal any of these wounds.



5. Support

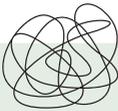
There are many aspects of being LGBTQA+ in your community about which a person might seek support. Some of these might be:

- a. Histories of Trauma:** Many LGBTQA+ people you support may have experienced trauma, rejection, and even abuse in the past because of their identity – at home, in their place of work or study, or in their faith community, even in your own community. Some of this trauma may be in the form of messages that the person has internalised regarding their moral character, their outlook for the future, or their inherent worth. They may also have experienced trauma as a result of attempts to change or suppress their LGBTQA+ identity, by themselves or others. They may need support to deal with misinformation, grief and shame associated with this history.^{xvii} These traumas may intersect in complex ways with other experiences of discrimination, such as racism or religious discrimination. Culturally competent approaches to LGBTQA+ pastoral care are needed that are sensitive to all aspects of a person's life.
- b. Social Relationships:** Accepting the LGBTQA+ parts of themselves may have significant implications for a person's family and social relationships. If being LGBTQA+ is highly stigmatised in their community, culture or family, they may experience confusion and turmoil about their cultural identity and family belonging. This may include risks of shaming their families and others within their community. They may need time and support to engage with the feelings associated with the social implications of affirming an LGBTQA+ identity.
- c. Safety:** 'Coming Out' as LGBTQA+ is often promoted in secular, Western communities as an essential rite of passage for LGBTQA+ people. However, this may not be what a person wants, and it might not be appropriate or safe. In communities with mixed views about sexuality or gender, it may be safer to support a person to find security and acceptance within themselves in the first instance. People may then wish to invite others into that knowledge about themselves later, when it is safe to do so.^{xviii}

6. Refer

Know what your expertise is and be prepared to refer people to others when they need support outside of that expertise. There may be pastoral care workers in your community or wider faith tradition with more experience supporting LGBTQA+ people. An LGBTQA+ person seeking pastoral care may benefit from also speaking with them.

Sometimes the line between psychological and spiritual support can be difficult to see. Some people asking for spiritual advice may also be experiencing mental health difficulties and need support from qualified mental health practitioners. It can be difficult for LGBTQA+ people of faith to find mental health support that is spiritually and culturally informed.^{xix} Be prepared to refer an LGBTQA+ person to mental health professionals who will respect and support their faith, culture, gender and sexuality.^{xx}



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7. Reflect

Pastoral care with LGBTQA+ people can provide you with a valuable opportunity to reflect on your, and your community's, pastoral practice. There are many aspects of this area of pastoral care that may benefit from reflection, including:

- a. Lived Experience:** Listen carefully and reflect on the stories of LGBTQA+ people in your community, and especially those who come to you seeking support. Communities often have established views and preconceptions that may not match an LGBTQA+ person's actual story. If you haven't heard someone's experiences properly, you may unintentionally cause them harm. Their perspective may also provide you with insight on how to improve your community's relationship with LGBTQA people.
- b. Community views:** Safety in pastoral care requires that you are aware of the range of views and attitudes an LGBTQA+ person might encounter in your community. Reflect on the views about LGBTQA+ people that other members of your community hold. Consider whether your community would benefit from support and education about LGBTQA+ people's lives and religious experiences.
- c. Tradition:** Religious communities often have more complex and rich traditions and histories related to gender and sexuality than we generally think. Faith leaders and pastoral workers should be curious about the different ways that gender and sexual expression have been valued at different times and places in their faith tradition.
- d. Pastoral policy:** It may be important to reflect on whether your current pastoral responses to LGBTQA+ people reflect the core values of your faith. Are your current policies the only possible guidance for living consistently within your tradition? Be open and curious. Inquire about the current and future possibilities for LGBTQA+ people to live and share their precious lives in and with your community.

Safety in pastoral care requires that you are aware of the range of views and attitudes an LGBTQA+ person might encounter in your community.



Summary

Our research showed that significant religious and psychological trauma can result from pastoral practices that make a person's sexuality and gender identity incompatible with belonging to their faith, family and community. Being told that unchangeable parts of yourself are incompatible with your faith can create a condition of existential crisis: the feeling that it is impossible to live at peace with the core parts of who you are. Such experiences can feel like a threat to someone's very existence, and can lead to complex post-traumatic stress disorders, suicidality as well as a host of other symptoms of mental ill health.

Best practice pastoral care with LGBTQA+ people will support them to accept who they are, and not try to change or suppress their identity. It will support an LGBTQA+ person of faith to explore the possibilities for safety, connection, belonging and self-expression within and consistent with the rules, traditions, and practices of their faith community. If their faith community has mixed views about LGBTQA+ people, it may also involve supporting them to find additional or alternative communities of belonging where their various parts can be valued and affirmed. It will also involve referral to appropriate mental health professionals when that is needed.



Contacts and resources

Further information and support can be found in the following organisations and webpages:

Information and Referral Organisations

The Religious Experiences of LGBTQA+ Australians research project:

<https://lgbtqareligiousexperiences.org.au/>
.....

Brave Network:

www.thebravenetwork.org
.....

SOGICE Survivors:

www.sogicesurvivors.com.au
.....

Australian GLBTIQ Multicultural Council:

www.agmc.org.au
.....

Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission (VEOHRC):

<https://www.humanrights.vic.gov.au/hub/lgbtiq-rights/>
<https://www.humanrights.vic.gov.au/for-individuals/religious-belief-or-activity/>
.....

VEOHRC Change or Suppression Practices Response Scheme:

<https://www.humanrights.vic.gov.au/change-or-suppression-practices/>
.....

Rainbow Door, free specialist culturally competent LGBTQA+ helpline:

<https://www.rainbowdoor.org.au/> & 1800 729 367
.....

Professional Development Opportunities

Blue Knot Professional Community, supporting trauma-informed professional practice:

<https://professionals.blueknot.org.au/>
.....

A Framework for Cultural Competence:

<https://www.ceh.org.au/resource-hub/a-framework-for-cultural-competence/>
.....

Definitions

Terminology for diverse sexualities and genders differs between cultures and has changed over time. While some terms have negative or discriminatory histories, every culture has also had and does have affirming terms. This guide uses the standards of respectful and inclusive language currently recommended by the Victorian Government.^{xxi}

A **lesbian** woman is romantically and/or sexually attracted to other women.

A **gay** person is romantically and/or sexually attracted to people of the same sex and/or gender as themselves. This term is often used to describe men who are attracted to other men, but some women and gender diverse people may describe themselves as gay.

A **bisexual** person is romantically and/or sexually attracted to people of their own gender and other genders. The term 'bi+' is also sometimes used to describe the multiplicity of bisexualities. The term multi-gender attracted (MGA) may also be used for those who experience attraction to more than one gender over a lifetime, regardless of self-identity or labels.

An **asexual** person may experience limited or no sexual attraction, but may experience romantic attraction towards others. Asexuality is commonly understood to be a spectrum and can fluctuate.

A **pansexual** person is romantically and/or sexually attracted to people of all genders, binary or non-binary.

A **heterosexual** (also referred to as straight) person is someone who is attracted to people of the opposite gender to themselves.

Queer is often used as an umbrella term for diverse genders or sexualities. Some people use queer to describe their own gender and/or sexuality. For some people, especially older LGBTIQ people, 'queer' may have negative connotations, because in the past it was used as a discriminatory term. For others, it's a term they have proudly reclaimed and been using comfortably for a long time.

Questioning The 'Q' in LGBTIQ is used here as 'Queer and questioning.' Some people are still exploring or questioning their gender or sexual

orientation. People may not wish to have one of the other labels applied to them yet, for a variety of reasons, but may still wish to be clear, for example, that they are non-binary or non-heterosexual. It is important these individuals feel welcome and included in the acronym and communities' spaces.

A **transgender** (or trans) person is someone whose gender does not exclusively align with the one they were assigned at birth.

A **cisgender** person (pronounced 'sis') is someone whose gender aligns with the sex they were assigned at birth – someone who isn't trans or gender diverse.

Gender diverse generally refers to a range of genders expressed in different ways. There are many terms used by gender diverse people to describe themselves. Language in this space is dynamic, particularly among young people, who may use different terms for themselves. Always be guided by their preference.

Non-binary is someone who does not identify as a man or a woman. Someone who is non-binary might feel like a mix of genders, or like they have no gender at all. They may use the pronouns 'they/them' or use something different. Always ask what pronouns a person uses, not what they prefer – a pronoun isn't a preference, it just is.

Coming out is the process LGBTQA people go through as they work to accept their sexual orientation or gender identity and then share their identity openly with others. There is no one right way to do it; each person's journey is their own.

Outing is the frowned upon practice of someone else revealing the sexual or gender identity of a person, usually against their wishes or without their knowledge.

An **intersex** person is born with atypical natural variations to physical or biological sex characteristics such as variations in chromosomes, hormones or anatomy^{xxii}. Intersex traits are a natural part of human bodily diversity. Not all intersex people use the term intersex.

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- xxii 'What is intersex?' Intersex Human Rights Australia. Available at: <https://ihra.org.au/18106/what-is-intersex/>.

