

TIPS FOR ENGAGING IN THERAPY WITH LGBTI PEOPLE AND FAMILY ISSUES

- Be willing to ask what family means to a client, and who they regard as their family, rather than assuming someone's idea and experience of family. Take cues from the way a person describes themselves, their relationships and their family, rather than applying hetero-normative language or concepts.
- Be aware of questions that are inappropriate and invasive, particularly if they are not necessary and based on stereotypes or limited models of family. Examples might be: asking who the birth parent is, or who the 'father figure' is in a lesbian couple, or who the donor is.
- It is important that if people are parenting, no matter what the biological circumstances of the conception or the family system and parenting roles, that people are recognised and valued as parents of that child.
- Take time to inquire about the strengths and vulnerabilities in a person's family systems in the present and the past, to understand complexity and explore family support.
- LGBTI people who are parenting may experience outside scrutiny or rejection of their family which may place pressure on the family to not show the hardships. It may be useful to normalise some of the common challenges of parenting and relationships, while also acknowledging the pressures that may be unique to their family.

- Working with many family members at the same time in a Family Therapy model may require some initial diligence. There may be risks in working with the whole family of origin at first, if there is rejection or unwillingness from the family. Therapy could be a staged process, where work commences with an individual and later includes other family members.
- LGBTI people who have suffered or experienced total rejection from families of origin may need to build greater resilience and have assistance on trust issues and coping mechanisms.
- Discussing or even introducing for the first time the idea of a "chosen family" can be very liberating for people feeling rejected by their family of origin.
- It is vital that the therapy room becomes a place of recognition of LGBTI people and their families. It is important not to repeat experiences of non-recognition that many LGBTI people have experienced in regards to themselves and their relationships, families and roles as parents.

FAMILIES

A QLIFE GUIDE FOR HEALTH PROFESSIONALS

Families and connection to loved ones are central to the well-being of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTI) people just as they are for non-LGBTI people.

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FAMILIES

FAMILIES ARE DIVERSE

There are many different types and experiences of family, and there is no 'typical' family. Understanding and affirming the diversity of families is an important part of supporting the mental health and wellbeing of LGBTI people.

Families are not the same for every person and culture. Some cultures have family constellations that involve more than two parents as the main family unit. In other cultures, non-biological community members are considered part of family. Some people, no matter what their cultural background, may decide that their family is made up of people who are not biologically related. Many people might also have multiple parents or only one parent due to relationship dissolution or choice. There is no single model of family for LGBTI people as well as non-LGBTI people.

LGBTI people may establish 'families of choice', who are supportive and loving of each other and are not necessarily biologically related. There are many reasons why a person may create a family of choice including; discrimination and rejection from their family of origin; finding more in common with people who know what it's like to be part of a marginalised group; and simply because they wish to. These families of choice may not be modelled on traditional family structures but are the place for support, connection and love for that person. Other LGBTI families may have a more traditional structure but may not be recognised as legitimate by the majority of people. These can include families where both parents are of the same gender; where there are multiple parents; adoptive parents; and an array of other family structures.

A person may also identify as having more than one family. This can be reflective of a number of circumstances but could be particularly pertinent for LGBTI people who have experienced separation, or rejection, from their family of origin and have created a family of choice, alongside their family of origin. These two families may be regarded as quite separate and still be equally important.

SUPPORT AND CONFLICT

LGBTI people may be part of a family of origin where people are openly accepting of their sexuality, gender identity or intersex characteristics. There is increasing awareness and acceptance of LGBTI people in society as a whole, leading to less discourses of shame for families who admit to having someone in their family who is LGBTI. Family support networks, such as Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG) have also helped alter the reactions of family members to an LGBTI disclosure within a family. These changes mean that it is important not to assume that a family of origin is inherently hostile to LGBTI people.

However, it is also not uncommon for LGBTI people to have ongoing problematic relationships in family settings due to responses from the family to the person's sexuality, gender identity or intersex characteristics. This may include disrespect, abusiveness and rejection. Families may exclude the person who has come out or disclosed, effectively disowning that person. Other families may tolerate their LGBTI family member on the surface but express homophobia and transphobia about others which often leaves their family member feeling isolated and unable to feel connected to that family. In some cases, there may be threats or violence, or family breakdown that becomes irreconcilable. In other families, over time, there may be willingness to renew relationships, and for family members to accept the loved one who has come out or disclosed.

The process of acceptance for some families with an LGBTI person may reflect a grieving process, with a sense of loss for who they thought their family member was, or would be. This is often experienced as rejection by the LGBTI person, and can mean a loss of support for a person at a time when they may be struggling with sexuality and/or gender identity. It may also be a loss of support for a someone who is feeling proud and excited about coming out or disclosing, but is met with shock and difficulty for loved ones in accepting them. In these situations,

there are likely to be quite different support needs for the LGBTI person and for the other members of the family.

INTERSEX PEOPLE AND FAMILY CONCERNS

Intersex people may have familial concerns that relate to the direct agency of their own biology and physical bodies rather than processes of coming out or disclosure. For example, some intersex people have experienced medical interventions as children which were decided by their doctor and families. While interventions may have been based on sound intentions and medical advice, decisions have often been instigated without consultation with the person themselves, and are often then experienced as unhelpful and invasive as an adult. Many people with intersex characteristics may not have known they are intersex until later in life due in large part to family secrecy and medical advice. Understandably, such life experiences may have caused strained relationships between intersex people and their families.

"RAINBOW FAMILIES"

There are still widely disseminated and dominant ideas that a 'real' family or a 'proper' family is biologically-based and heterosexual and that non-biological parents are somehow not 'real' parents. However, the contemporary shape of Australian families, wider societal opinion and the legal definitions of family in Australia challenge this.

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Increasingly, LGBTI people are having and raising children in a range of different circumstances. Although most recognised LGBTI families are couples of women, an increasing number of gay men are also parenting in many different situations including primary parenting roles. Many bisexual, trans and intersex people are parents and their families also come in a range of structures. Some children may share two sets of same-gender parents, one set or a mixture. As with any family,

children in LGBTI families may be as a result of birth, adoption, surrogacy, fostering and through parenting as part of step and blended families.

Research indicates that same-gender parented families can experience high levels of social support and recognition from schools, service providers and communities but that this acceptance is driven by a range of factors, including location, income level and culture. For many LGBTI parents, experiences of being public with their parental status can be difficult for both parents and children, including for children whose parents who come out later in life.

Many people in same-gender (female) relationships have stated that they had a strong desire for children and devoted a great deal of time and thought to choosing parenthood. In these families, successive empirical studies have shown high levels of shared employment and an egalitarian spirit in decision-making, parenting, and family work. Such couples also report higher satisfaction than mixed gender couples with both their committed relationships and each other's parenting. Research has also shown that same-gender (female) relationships tended to equal or surpass heterosexual married couples on time spent with children, parenting skill, and warmth and affection provided.

Although research indicates that many same-gender parents and their families have close connections and experience high levels of support and respect from their families of origin, the intersection of these new family units and the families of origin may be a cause of tension. Families may experience heightened levels of tension if and when LGBTI families have a child/children. LGBTI couples will, for example, sometimes put off telling their family they are seeking parenthood for fear of a negative response. This potential increase in tensions can mean a loss of family support and can undermine wider recognition and support of LGBTI families.



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