

This information is about religion, spirituality, and supporting LGBTQ+ people.

WHAT'S THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN SPIRITUALITY AND RELIGION?

While they share similarities and may sometimes be used interchangeably, religion and spirituality are two different things.

Religion refers to a [set of particular beliefs and practices](#) that usually revolve around the worship of a particular deity, like gods or goddesses. These beliefs are typically shared by a group.

Spirituality, on the other hand, is typically [more of an individual practice](#), outside of the confines of a particular religious tradition. It's generally concerned with the human spirit and soul, with themes of love, compassion and truth.

While many LGBTQ+ people have strong religious beliefs, others may not feel comfortable with organised religion due to past issues of discrimination or harm. Spirituality may give them a way to practice some form of faith, safely, in their own way.

RELIGION, SPIRITUALITY, & SEXUALITY CAN BE COMPLICATED

It's common for LGBTQ+ people to have complex relationships with religion and faith, particularly when many dominant religious institutions are and have been discriminatory towards LGBTQ+ communities.

Thankfully, these days, many religious organisations and spiritual groups are openly welcoming of LGBTQ+ people. From churches, synagogues and temples, to peer support groups, there are many opportunities for LGBTQ+ people to celebrate their faith and spirituality.

For example, one of the major principles of the worldwide Metropolitan Community Church (which has a number of branches in Australia) is to support and advocate for LGBTQ+ equality from a Christian perspective. There are interpretations of major texts from Islam, Judaism and Christianity that are LGBTQ+-affirming and celebrate diversity among their followers.

There are also safe spaces for LGBTQ+ people among Buddhist, Hindu and Sikh congregations and traditions—and some LGBTQ+ people have even formed their own spiritual communities, like the Radical Fairies, which focus on the spiritual experiences and possibilities of being a gay man.

RELIGION & SPIRITUALITY



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RELIGION & SPIRITUALITY

CHALLENGES OF BEING RELIGIOUS AND LGBTQ+

WHY CONVERSION PRACTICES ARE HARMFUL

It's easy to think of conversion practices as something of the past—but these incredibly harmful practices still occur around the globe, including in Australia. While laws against conversion practices have been introduced in [Victoria](#), Queensland and ACT, it's still currently [legal in NSW](#), South Australia, Tasmania, [Western Australia](#) and the Northern Territory—although legislation is being discussed in these jurisdictions.

Conversion practices, which are also sometimes called “religious counselling” or “reparative therapy”, attempt to “convert” LGBTQ+ people to be heterosexual or cisgender. It is a cruel, pseudoscientific practice that attempts to suppress or change someone's gender or sexuality, with the idea that they require treatment to be “cured” in order to live a “happy” life that conforms with rigid heteronormative ideals. It is an outdated and incredibly disturbing practice that sprung from American Christian fundamentalist circles in the 1970s.

Many mainstream psychotherapy and psychiatry associations, like the Australian Psychological Society, have made public statements condemning and discrediting conversion practices, calling them unethical and harmful.

People who have experienced conversion practices often say they struggle with the guilt and shame instilled in them—and it's not uncommon for people to later die by suicide as a result of believing they are “wrong”. Those who experience conversion practices are often extremely traumatised and are in need of intensive, affirming support.

Someone's religion can be deeply tied to their sense of self and worth—especially if they've been raised in a deeply religious household or community. So, if a LGBTQ+ person decides to walk away from their religion, it can have a huge impact on their sense of identity. They might feel conflicted or distressed, even if they chose to walk away.

It can also be additionally difficult if they've been raised to have a relationship to particular deities, and now feel like that relationship is lost. This struggle can also be heightened if someone is from a culturally and linguistically diverse background, especially cultures with tight family connections. Even just realising you're LGBTQ+ can be an enormous challenge, particularly if someone's been raised with a religion that prohibits diversity of gender and sexual orientation.

However, walking away from a particular religious group doesn't mean someone isn't religious—an LGBTQ+ person might still be deeply religious, but choose to practice their faith in a way that affirms their gender identity and sexuality. This might also bring a new sense of self and a new relationship with a person's deities, which can be extremely healing, especially if a person's family is accepting of their gender identity and sexuality.

LGBTQ+ people who are religious may also experience additional backlash and lateral violence from other LGBTQ+ people who've had poor experiences with religion and faith. It's important to understand that not all religions or religious people are discriminatory, and everyone deserves the right to follow and practice their faith or spirituality.

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RELIGION & SPIRITUALITY

RELIGION AND GENDER DIVERSITY

Transgender and gender diverse people can be at greater risk of having problematic experiences and relationships with religious institutions and followers of certain faiths. This is because many conservative interpretations of scriptures follow the belief that gender is binary: that there are only cisgender men or cisgender women, and these roles should be strictly adhered to. It leaves no room for the diversity that can exist in gender.

While some religious texts and groups believe in gender diversity, many people may feel pressured to conform to the gender binary, particularly when these gendered roles and behaviours are a significant part of a particular religion. In some cases, you can't enter a house of worship without selecting one of the two gender binary options, which can make gender diverse people feel additionally excluded.

It's important that people who experience these challenges find safe spaces where their concerns can be validated.

WORKING WITH LGBTQ+ PEOPLE WHO ARE RELIGIOUS OR SPIRITUAL

- It's important mental health professionals and counsellors don't make assumptions about an LGBTQ+ person's relationship to religion or spirituality. Some might have a well-developed sense of spirituality, while others are finding their way. Some will be involved with organised religions—including conservative religions—while others might completely reject it. Some may also have a different relationship with the cultural practices associated with their religion, rather than the teachings of the religion.
- You can find a list of LGBTQ+ multicultural and religious groups on the [Rainbow Cultures website](#). You can also check out QLife's directory [here](#)

WORKING WITH LGBTQ+ PEOPLE WHO ARE RELIGIOUS OR SPIRITUAL (cont.)

- If an LGBTQ+ person has a deep attachment to their religious background, their self-acceptance process may have been more difficult—particularly those from rule-based religions traditions. Be mindful of the long-lasting and intrusive residual impacts these religious backgrounds may cause. Even years later, people can be profoundly impacted, especially if they no longer have contact with their biological relatives as a result of being LGBTQ+ or breaking away from a religion.
- Therapy can be an important for an LGBTQ+ person's healing after relationship disruption due to religions beliefs. A "family approach" can be effective, although it may not be safe to work with a person's biological family. LGBTQ+ people who've experienced rejection from their biological families may need help on trust issues, coping mechanisms, self-worth and building resilience after the loss of their supports.
- While not every LGBTQ+ person will struggle with their sexual orientation and/or gender, those from religious backgrounds may experience feelings of shame or "sinfulness" as a result of a strict religious upbringing. They may experience significant feelings of shame, guilt and embarrassment when it comes to sex.
- Health practitioners should be aware of LGBTQ+-friendly options in different religions, so they refer their clients if needed. Many of these groups are established in major Australian cities, like Melbourne and Sydney. While there are some options for people in rural areas, this can also be a challenge—but many religious groups also have easy-to-access online presences.
- LGBTQ+ people who've experienced rejection from their biological relatives may also face other issues, like needing to find a stable, safe home environment. They may also have concerns about their ability to support themselves, including spiritually, emotionally and financially—especially if they are young and not yet independent.

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