



# PRISM IN PRACTICE

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## SUPPORTING LGBTIQ+ YOUNG PEOPLE FROM RELIGIOUS BACKGROUNDS

A resource for health workers



## ABOUT THIS RESOURCE

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This resource was developed as part of a suite of resources for health workers who are supporting LGBTIQ+ young people. It provides practice guidance for workers who may be working with LGBTIQ+ young people from religious backgrounds, as this is an intersection of experiences that may bring with it specific needs for appropriate care. While some LGBTIQ+ young people from religious backgrounds experience challenges based on their gender identity, sexuality or innate variations of sex characteristics – others do not. For some, these don't feel like prominent facets of their experience, and many LGBTIQ+ people are embraced by their families and religious communities. On the other hand, we know that many LGBTIQ+ young people from religious backgrounds are navigating safety in complex situations and managing different parts of their identity and experience.

We use the term 'religious backgrounds' to describe all people who are currently practicing religion, have an ongoing and dynamic relationship with religion, or no longer have a relationship to religion but have families that do. We also recognise that 'people of faith' and 'spirituality' may be terms that might resonate more for some people. When addressing your client, the best practice is to mirror the language they use for themselves, and don't assume that they will identify with other similar words. If in doubt, respectfully ask.

## EXPERIENCES OF LGBTIQ+ YOUNG PEOPLE FROM RELIGIOUS BACKGROUNDS

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Many LGBTIQ+ people from religious backgrounds are able to maintain strong relationships with their family and religious community, while also maintaining connection to LGBTIQ+ communities. It is a misconception that being LGBTIQ+ is accepted in some religions and not in others. Homophobia, transphobia and discrimination based on intersex status are not inherent to any particular religion. Where a religious leader, group or family claims that a religious text dictates rejection of LGBTIQ+ people, it is important to recognise the homophobia, transphobia and discrimination of those interpretations.

Unfortunately, many LGBTIQ+ young people from religious backgrounds experience harm from their family and religious community because of discriminatory attitudes about gender, sexuality and bodies. Many people born with innate variations of sex characteristics are taught to be ashamed of their body, and for some, their fertility status. They may face extra pressure to embody traditionally gendered roles in how they participate in religious practices, rituals and community.

Many young people experience family violence when their families learn that they're sexuality or gender diverse. Some are told they will bring shame to the family and be pressured to keep their sexuality or gender a secret. Often, it becomes unsafe for the young person to stay living in the family home, or they may be forced out by family. Others may be pressured or coerced into attending meetings or appointments with spiritual leaders or even counsellors, in an attempt to change their queer identity to become heterosexual or cisgender. These are called *conversion practices* (described further in this resource).

## RELIGION, FAITH & COMMUNITY

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For many people of faith, their religion can play a crucial role in forming their self-concept, sense of belonging and their support network. Even if a person's community is not supportive of their LGBTIQ+ identity or experience, the religion may still provide support to that person in other important ways, and practicing their religion may still be important for their wellbeing. While it might be tempting to suggest that someone should leave their religion if they don't embrace LGBTIQ+ communities, this may not be a helpful or feasible option, especially for young people, whose basic needs depend on their family. It can also reinforce the notion that the young person's only option is to choose either their religion or their pride in their LGBTIQ+ identity and experience.

On the other hand, for some young people, choosing to leave or step away from their religious community does feel like the only option that will allow them to honour their LGBTIQ+ identity and experience. In these situations, stepping away may present additional challenges. Research shows that leaving a religious community poses a high risk of distress, self-harm and suicidal ideation due to the isolation and identity fragmentation it may cause.

**Dignity of risk:** *the right for someone to be supported to make their own decisions about their life, even if they involve risks.*

When supporting an LGBTIQ+ young person with non-accepting religious communities or family, workers can **cultivate safety and sensitivity** by:

- Being led by the young person to explore their options
- Supporting the young person's dignity of risk to make their own choices
- Working with the young person to identify their resources and supports to help them through moments of heightened distress
- Sharing relevant services for out-of-hours mental health support
- Connecting the young person with faith-inclusive LGBTIQ+ peer support and social groups
- Understanding your mandatory reporting obligations if you believe the young person is at significant risk of harm

Workers may **jeopardise safety and sensitivity** by:

- Sharing personal opinions about what the young person should do
- Debating with the young person or family about specific interpretations of religious texts
- Vilifying the young person's family/religious community for being non-accepting
- Pressuring the young person to come out or disclose

## 'INVITING IN' AND CONFIDENTIALITY

For LGBTIQ+ young people, maintaining confidentiality should be a key concern for workers. Breaching the confidentiality of LGBTIQ+ young people can pose serious risks to their safety, including increased risk of family violence, homelessness and isolation if family members aren't supportive.

For many LGBTIQ+ people, the decision to disclose their sexuality, gender or innate variation of sex characteristics is a big one. Often, this process is referred to as 'coming out of the closet'. Some LGBTIQ+ young people with non-accepting families and communities feel that their only option is to keep this information private, or to 'stay in the closet.' However, the process of disclosing can be more complex than just being 'in' or 'out.'

Sekneh Hammoud-Beckett's concept of [Inviting In](#) offers LGBTIQ+ people more agency and choice. Instead of coming out, the LGBTIQ+ person can choose who they deem trustworthy enough to invite in. This can help the person see this part of themselves as special and sacred to be shared, rather than kept as a deep, dark secret. Inviting In helps LGBTIQ+ young people from religious find their own way to embrace all parts of who they are.

### **If an LGBTIQ+ client invites you in, you can:**

- Thank them for trusting you with this information
- Confirm who else in the client's life has (and hasn't) been invited in
- Ask a trans or gender diverse client what name and pronouns you should use for them when speaking to their parents, family and other workers
- Ensure other team members who have been invited in are informed of this, too
- Ensure an intersex young person understands their innate variation of sex characteristics and their rights in medical settings
- Adapt systems and processes (eg. intake forms, eMR, case notes) to ensure they suit the needs of each client

*"I recently worked with a young non-binary person, Axel. They hadn't disclosed their gender identity with their parents who would pick them up after our sessions. After our third session together, Axel's mum came to collect them and said to me, "Amy might need to change the time of next week's session – is that okay?" Axel and I had already made a plan together, so I knew to use their birth name and she/her pronouns when talking with their parents. I responded, "that's fine – just make sure she calls the office a couple days before to let us know." I was really keen to get Axel's feedback on this, so I brought up this interaction with them the following week, inviting feedback and letting them know I was happy to revisit our confidentiality plan whenever they like."*

**Counsellor**

## CONVERSION PRACTICES

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Conversion practices (also known as conversion and suppression practices, gay conversion therapy, sexual orientation and gender identity change efforts) are practices performed on someone who is queer or trans to change their sexuality or gender identity to heterosexual or cisgender. They are often performed by a religious leader, associate of a religious institution, religious counsellor or even a secular counsellor. Conversion practices are illegal in NSW and there are formal processes in place for victim/survivors to make a report or formal complaint to Anti-Discrimination NSW.

Research shows these practices are not effective at all in changing people's identity and that they actually create more distress and trauma for the victim/survivor. As stated in the [Conversion Practices Ban Act 2024 \(NSW\)](#), a conversion practice means a practice, treatment or sustained effort that is:

- directed to an individual on the basis of the individual's sexual orientation or gender identity, and
- directed to changing or suppressing the individual's sexual orientation or gender identity.

Conversion practices can take many forms, including:

- General or religion-based counselling or other psychological interventions
- Medical interventions
- Religious conferences
- Spiritual deliverance practices

Conversion practices are sometimes framed as support from a religious institution or leader to guide someone through 'confusion' about their identity, so some queer and trans young people are coerced into participating in conversion practices without knowing it. Some may have willingly participated and even still speak about the experience with positivity. Workers are encouraged to offer to support the young person to make a formal complaint or report their experience of conversion practices to Anti-Discrimination NSW.

### **If an LGBTIQ+ young person you work with is currently, or has been previously, a victim/survivor of conversion practices:**

- Listen with curiosity and without judgement
- Move at the young person's pace
- Use your clinical judgment to gauge when or if it would be helpful to talk about conversion practices
- Understand the reporting/complaint pathways and be prepared to advocate if needed

### **"What about religious freedom?"**

In Australia, everyone has the freedom to believe, preach and practice their religious beliefs. For some, this may include negative beliefs about LGBTIQ+ communities. However, no one has the freedom to enact harm or infringe on the rights and autonomy of others– such as coercing or forcing them not to be LGBTIQ+ based on religious beliefs.

## COMMUNITY, PEER SUPPORT AND ROLE MODELS

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For LGBTIQ+ young people who do not feel affirmed or accepted in their religious community, online and in-person peer support is a key protective factor and can even be lifesaving. Being socially connected to an LGBTIQ+ community group who shares the same or similar lived experience can help LGBTIQ+ young people feel a sense of belonging and acceptance. In fact, there are many LGBTIQ+ peer support groups for different religions around the country to support people to embrace these two parts of themselves (see resources on rear page). It may not always be possible to identify a peer support group that aligns with every young person's faith. In this case, workers can seek to connect them with representation and role models in the public sphere who share similar identities and experiences. These can be an antidote to the isolation, rejection and shame they may feel.

### **Led by the young person, workers may consider the following:**

- Is there a community peer support group for LGBTIQ+ people of their faith that they could connect with?
- Is there an LGBTIQ+ inclusive pride group at school?
- Would the young person like to be connected to online or in-person intersex peer support?
- Is there a colleague with a similar identity or lived experience that you could introduce them to?
- Are there any visible LGBTIQ+ artists, musicians, actors or athletes of faith in the public sphere who could be role models?

## EMBRACING COMPLEXITY

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Workers can support LGBTIQ+ young people from religious backgrounds to embrace their own unique and expansive relationship to their faith, values and community. This may involve supporting the young person to hold multiple truths and envision new narratives to embrace the complexity of the many parts of who they are. While their faith can be a site of internal conflict for some LGBTIQ+ people, it may still be a key protective factor in helping them navigate the associated distress and to stay connected to themselves and their community.

## CASE STUDY

Ray (he/they), 17, North Sydney

*"I realised I was attracted to guys when I was about 12. I grew up hearing messages from my church leaders that being gay was a sin and I knew my parents thought that too. For years I was so stressed because my family and my faith are so important to me. I felt like I couldn't be gay, otherwise I'd lose them both.*

*Over the last couple years, my school counsellor talked to me about holding these two parts of myself at the same time, and I learned that they don't have to cancel each other out. When I was little, I didn't know there were other Christians who are queer. Now, I've had an amazing boyfriend for 6 months!*

*My parents and church community don't know that I'm gay, and I can't imagine telling them and being accepted. That does make me sad sometimes, but for now, this is how I've figured out how to be me. Or at least, I'm figuring out how to embrace this complexity with the help of my school counsellor."*

### What kind of support could you offer to help clients embrace complexity?

- Connect your client with stories and people who embrace their faith and their LGBTIQA+ experience
- Share dialectical thinking techniques with your client to help manage opposing ideas and messages they may be receiving
- Use narrative therapy techniques to help them frame their self-story from a strengths-based perspective
- Listen with curiosity to any feelings of shame or discomfort the client may have about practicing gendered cultural practices that don't align with their gender as a means of keeping a connection to their culture and community
- Help the young person build a bank of resources for times of distress. These might include:
  - Safe places they can go
  - Movies, music, art
  - Activities, hobbies, sports
  - Supportive people to talk to
  - Mental health support services
  - Nervous system regulation practices
  - Religious/spiritual practices and stories

This resource was funded by NSW Health, and developed by Twenty10 in collaboration with **Multicultural Peers Project** and **InterAction for Health & Human Rights**.

Twenty10 supports LGBTIQ+ young people aged 12 - 25 across New South Wales with specialised housing, counselling, care coordination, brokerage and a wide range of early intervention social support programs. We are also the NSW state partner for QLife, Australia's national phone and web based peer support service. These resources have been developed through our Learning and Development program, who deliver statewide training in LGBTIQ+ inclusivity and affirming practice.

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**Find more resources  
and information here:**



[twenty10.org.au/prism-in-practice](https://twenty10.org.au/prism-in-practice)



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