

**A GUIDE FOR HEALTH SERVICES
TO SUPPORT LGBTI CLIENTS
DURING THE MARRIAGE
EQUALITY DEBATE**

WHY THE MARRIAGE EQUALITY DEBATE IS IMPORTANT FOR YOUR CLIENTS AND YOUR SERVICE?

Marriage equality continues to remain out of reach for many people in Australia's Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Intersex (LGBTI) communities.

With marriage equality currently under debate in Australia, we are already seeing an increase in anti- LGBTI commentary and expect this to increase as the debate continues.

It is well documented that LGBTI people experience higher levels of psychosocial distress and are at increased risk of health issues including depression, anxiety, self-harm, suicidal ideation and suicide.

Many of these conditions have been attributed to experiences and fears of discrimination and abuse.

These pre-existing higher rates of mental health issues in LGBTI communities make these groups more vulnerable to the potentially negative rhetoric that may arise in the prolonged national debate on marriage equality.

Many of these Australians, including young people, may use your service.

The debate is already having a significant impact on Australia's LGBTI

community members, who continue to have their lives and relationships scrutinised and judged.

This is both unsurprising and highly regrettable. Much of the 'debate' promulgates false stereotypes and misinformation that can be used throughout print, electronic and broadcast media, political rallies and other social interactions.

It's imperative that during this time health services are in a position to provide an LGBTI inclusive and friendly space.

This is particularly important given a likely increase in LGBTI people accessing mental health services for support, particularly in regional and rural areas.

It's also important for services to profile publicly that they are LGBTI inclusive and friendly. This will let prospective LGBTI clients know that they're welcome, and that they will receive the same high quality service as everyone else.

This resource provides health services with information to support clients who may be experiencing distress due to the debate by ensuring their services are welcoming of LGBTI people.

Within this document we have utilised the LGBTI (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex) acronym due to the nature of existing research, and practice. Some of the evidence provided within this resource reflects the research focus on same-sex couples (LGB people).

A SNAPSHOT OF LGBTI PEOPLE AND MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES

Research clearly indicates that discrimination, abuse (both verbal and physical), exclusion and prejudice are key contributors to increased rates of depression, mental health and self-harm (Leonard, Lyons, & Bariola, 2015; Rosenstreich, 2013).

When compared with heterosexual people, lesbian, gay and bisexual people are twice as likely to experience anxiety (31.5 per cent compared with 14.1 per cent) and three times as likely to experience depression and related disorders (19 per cent compared with 6 per cent) (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2008).

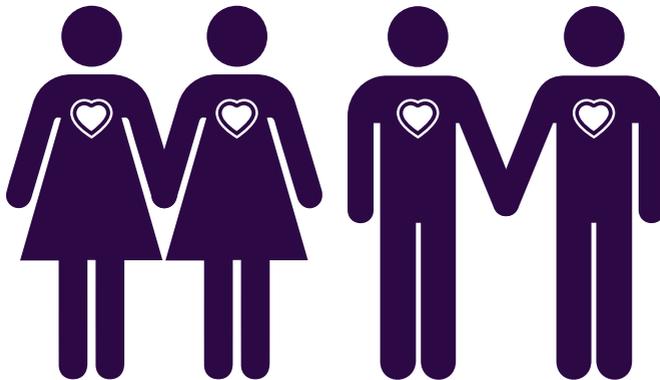
When compared to the broader cisgender population, transgender people are 4 times more likely to have been diagnosed with depression and 1.5 times more likely to have ever been diagnosed with an anxiety disorder in their lifetime. (Hyde et al., 2014)

Of people with Intersex variations, aged 16 and over, 21.3% have been diagnosed with depression and 12.9% have been diagnosed with anxiety. (Jones, et al., 2016)

Same-sex attracted Australians have up to 14x higher rates of suicide attempts than their heterosexual peers (King, 2008).

Systemic discrimination has clear impacts on the health of minority groups.

Almost half of LGB people hide their sexuality because they fear violence of discrimination, with young people aged 16 to 24 more likely to do so than any other age group (Slade et.al, 2009).



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MARRIAGE EQUALITY AND ITS IMPACTS

Systemic discrimination has clear impacts on the health of minority groups.

Research and evidence in other countries indicates that marriage equality will lessen the systemic discrimination experienced by LGB people and therefore impact positively on their health.

US research has shown that the mental health of LGB people suffered significantly during referenda debates on marriage equality. For LGB people who experienced a US state referendum on marriage equality there was a:

- 37% increase in mood disorders
- 42% increase in alcohol-use disorders
- 248% increase in generalised anxiety disorders

In states without such referenda, there was no increase (Hatzenbuehler, McLaughlin, Keyes, & Hasin, 2010).

“In terms of how public debate affects me, I simply try to avoid too much exposure to it because the homophobia upsets and angers me so much.... I show up for rallies and other things when I think I can tolerate what I might hear and don't go when I think I might lose my temper. When I get exposed to too much of it, I end up very angry and depressed, sometimes for weeks following, and that then affects my relationships, my work and my happiness”.

There are very few studies on the impact of debates surrounding marriage equality on heterosexual or “straight” allies. Interviews conducted by Arm, Horne and Levitt (2009) of heterosexual people who had LGB family members

and who lived in Tennessee during the marriage amendment campaign of 2006 revealed that the interviewees experienced feelings of anger, distress and fear. These interviewees reported relationship tensions with those around them who saw the issue differently or did not want to be involved. Participants felt compelled to continue the fight for equality.

It is important to acknowledge that family members, friends, and allies of LGB people may very well be subject to the negative consequences of a debate on same-sex marriage as they are implicated on account of their association with the targeted group.

Marriage equality does not impact on all transgender or intersex people. However, for those who experience a direct impact, whether through relationship recognition or through barriers to legally affirming gender, minimal research evidence currently exists.

For an overview of the impacts of marriage equality and marriage denial on the health of LGBTI people please see the [Evidence Review and Annotated Bibliography](#) on this topic undertaken by ACON and the Centre for Social Research in Health, UNSW.

WHAT CAN YOUR SERVICE DO?

- Acknowledge and be aware of the potential impact of the public debate on clients.
- Indicate on your website and in your printed materials that your service does not discriminate and welcomes all people and explicitly include LGBTI people in this.
- Establish visible cues of inclusion such as displaying a poster for QLife, the National LGBTI Helpline, and supply LGBTI resources.
- Develop relationships with your local and statewide LGBTI health services.
- Build your capacity to assess if/when your LGBTI clients require specialist LGBTI support.
- Provide a list of referral options and communicate support pathways e.g. on websites and client newsletters.
- Ensure your staff members have been appropriately trained in LGBTI inclusive practice and that your internal policies are reviewed to ensure they are inclusive. ACON can assist you with this.
- Revise intake forms and paperwork to make sure they are inclusive. Include appropriately worded sexuality and gender indicators. ACON can assist you with this.
- Increase positive messages for LGBTI clients.
- Be a visible ally - put a sign in client areas, wear a badge or pin, actively talk about being an ally to others, and attend LGBTI inclusion events.
- Call out non-inclusive language or behavior when comfortable doing so.
- Be vigilant of behaviour and of conversations that might be harmful, and ensure staff know procedures for handling such incidents.

INSTEAD OF: ✘

Are you married?

Do you have a girlfriend/boyfriend?

What is your husband/wife's name?

Are you male/female?

USE: ✔

Do you have a partner?

Are you in a relationship?

What is your partner's name?

How do you identify your gender?

QUICK REFERENCE FOR SERVICES

- Don't assume all service users are heterosexual and/or cisgender.
- Be aware the unique of social and emotional issues that LGBTI people face.
- Respond supportively when someone discloses they're LGBTI.
- Challenge homophobia and transphobia and ensure your policies reflect this.
- Demonstrate that your practice is inclusive of LGBTI people.
- Develop appropriate and inclusive referral pathways for LGBTI clients.

“ A professional and compassionate service makes me feel heard, acknowledged and understood by the worker. Taking the time to see how I am makes a real difference.

HOW TO ASK LGBTI SERVICE USERS ABOUT COMING OUT AND LGBTI RELATED EXPERIENCES

“It sounds like you are questioning your feelings /your orientation/ your identity...has that been on your mind?”

“What concerns you about how people might react if you choose to talk to them about your identity?”

“Have you come out to any of your friends or family?”

“Are there other lesbian/gay/bisexual/trans or intersex people you know that you can talk to? Are they supportive?”

“Have you spoken with others about the fact that you are living with an intersex variation?”

“Have you had any negative experiences since coming out?”

FURTHER ISSUES FOR CONSIDERATION

Over the coming months many people will voice their opinions on marriage equality through a range of channels.

It is important to remember most Australian individuals and communities have embraced equality and celebrated the diversity that lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex people bring to Australian society.

The ongoing discussion about the plebiscite will potentially give license to some people to make negative and hurtful discussions about LGBTI people, their relationships and their families.

This debate is likely to lead to some LGBTI people feeling upset or experiencing heightened anxiety that their relationships, and indeed identities, are not considered to be equal to other Australians.

This can be confronting or overwhelming for people and one way to manage this is to take a break from information networks that they may find upsetting or offensive.

Some clients and staff may be unsure about how to talk to their children about the things they may hear or read during the lead up to the plebiscite and may require further support in this regard. This will be of particular importance for LGBTI parents.

Transgender people in a relationship with someone of a different gender to their own (i.e. a heterosexual relationship) may be differently impacted by the marriage equality debate, particularly those who are already married and unable to amend the sex on their birth certificate without first divorcing their husband or wife.

Some transgender and intersex people are already legally married to their spouse and may be completely unaffected by the marriage equality debate as well so it's good to be mindful of this and remember that different LGBTI person will place different emphasis on the importance of marriage equality in their lives.

“ [Client speaking of a service] I came here feeling hopeless, stuck in self-hatred. I am leaving as someone full of hope and confidence to be and celebrate the person I am.

SUPPORT AND INFORMATION

Referral options and further information:

ACON

For counselling, referral support and inclusivity training.

acon.org.au | 02 9206 2000

QLife

Free National telephone and online counselling service 3pm - 12am daily.

1800 184 527 | qlife.org.au

Beyond Blue

National phone support 24 hours, 7 days a week and online 3pm to 12am daily and online information and resources.

1300 22 4636 | beyondblue.org.au

LifeLine

National 24 hour, 7 days a week phone and online counselling.

13 11 14 | lifeline.org.au

National Association of Community Legal Centres (NACLC)

Community Legal Centres for legal referrals and information.

02 9264 9595 | naclc.org.au

Rainbow Families

Advise, information and social groups for LGBTI families in NSW and ACT.

rainbowfamilies.com.au

Just Equal

Australian community campaign to advocate for justice and equality for LGBTIQ Australians their families, friends and communities.

equal.org.au

Australian Marriage Equality Organisation

National organisation raising awareness and advocacy campaigns.

australianmarriageequality.org

PFLAG

Organisation for parents, family and friends drawn together because someone they know or love is gay or lesbian, information and support groups.

02 9294 1022

pflagaustralia.org.au

OTHER STATE AND TERRITORY AIDS COUNCILS

Victoria

VAC

1800 134 840 (counselling centre)

vac.org.au

Northern Territory

NTAHC

08 8944 7777 (Darwin)

ntahc.org.au

Western Australia

WA AIDS Council

08 9482 0000

waids.com

ACT

AIDS Action Council

02 6257 2855

aidsaction.org.au

Queensland

QUAC

07 3017 1777

quac.org.au

South Australia

SAMESH

08 7099 5300

samesh.org.au

Tasmania

tasCHARD

03 6234 1242

www.tascahrd.org.au

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