

LGBTQ+  
CHANGE  
AND  
SUPPRESSION  
PRACTICES

## WHAT ARE LGBTQ+ CHANGE AND SUPPRESSION PRACTICES?

LGBTQ+ Change and Suppression Practices are teachings, counselling, spiritual care activities, or other psychological or medical interventions based on the ideology that there is something wrong or broken about people being, or thinking they might be, lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and gender diverse, or queer (LGBTQ+).

THERE IS NOTHING WRONG WITH BEING LGBTQ+. YOU'RE NOT "BROKEN", AND YOU DO NOT NEED "HEALING".

Various names have been given to LGBTQ+ Change and Suppression Practices, commonly called conversion practices, the "ex-gay" and "ex-trans" movements, "Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity Change Efforts", "reparative therapy", and gay or trans "conversion therapy". Religion-based LGBTQ+ change and suppression movements only emerged in the 1970s after secular medicine rejected experimentation and professional practice in this area.

The range of activities, ideas and teachings that are commonly associated with LGBTQ+ Change and Suppression Practices have included psychological counselling, pastoral activities, accountability groups, and spiritual healing. Sometimes conversion activities are not explicitly labelled as such, but are conducted covertly through holiness or purity focussed religious activities, or counselling for "identity confusion" that has heterosexuality and a fixed gender identity as their main goal.

The teachings or messages may try to tell you, or someone you love, that being heterosexual is "normal" and that they can offer you ways to "become straight". They will most likely communicate that people who are LGBTQ+ become this way due to abuse, trauma or other problems during childhood or early teenage years. They may use language that seems helpful, like assisting you to overcome unwanted attractions, or helping you live your "natural" gender (even if that doesn't feel natural to you). But such "support" still suggests that there is something wrong that needs to be fixed.

When we're born, our sex is written on our birth certificates. Often, people confuse sex (the biology of our bodies) with gender (how we identify and how we express ourselves in the world). Change and Suppression Practices may also encourage people to think that a person's gender is fixed once it's written on their birth certificate, but we know this isn't true for everybody.



## DO LGBTQ+ CHANGE AND SUPPRESSION PRACTICES WORK?

No. Many studies have been performed around the world to test the effectiveness of change and suppression practices. None of them have shown that it is possible to reorient a person's gender or sexual identity through therapeutic or spiritual intervention, or suppress these without harm.

International psychological, health and medical authorities now recognise that diverse gender and sexual identities are a normal part of the range of human experience, and do not need to be changed or suppressed.

LGBTQ+ 'CONVERSION PRACTICE' IS NOW A BREACH OF PROFESSIONAL ETHICS FOR REGISTERED HEALTH PRACTITIONERS.

A small number of studies have shown that LGBTQ+ people can learn to behave, for a time, as if they are heterosexual or the gender that other people want them to be. But their LGBTQ+ sense of self, emotional and sexual orientation never goes away.



## LGBTQ+ CHANGE AND SUPPRESSION PRACTICES CAN BE HARMFUL

Research shows that change and suppression practices, including some “support groups”, do real harm to people. Media coverage has tended to focus on extreme religious practices or uncommon and dangerous medical procedures. However, the experience of survivors is that informal practices can be among the most harmful.

Non-affirming pastoral care (where a faith organisation appears to be welcoming but doesn’t really accept a person being LGBTQ+), repeatedly being told that you are “broken” or can be “fixed”, and rejection or exclusion from families and communities all have long-term traumatic effects. And when LGBTQ+ people are encouraged to “pass” or achieve “reorientation” by entering marriage with a person of a different sex, they can potentially also bring unhappiness and deep harm to those they marry, and any children born into that marriage.

STUDIES HAVE SHOWN  
THAT LGBTQ+ CHANGE AND  
SUPPRESSION PRACTICES  
CAUSE SERIOUS HARM.

People who have undergone conversion activities have suffered:

- › major anxiety and depression, including suicidality
- › difficulties forming and maintaining relationships
- › difficulty with sexual function
- › guilt, shame and grief
- › deep spiritual harm at being rejected by their families, communities or losing their faith
- › financial impact from costs of ‘conversion’ practices, lost earnings and opportunities, and later recovery
- › significant delays in pursuing a career or vocation

This is why the government is committed to protecting LGBTQ+ people from practices that seek to change or suppress sexual orientation or gender affirmation through law reform and community education.



## WHY DO LGBTQ+ PEOPLE TRY TO CHANGE OR SUPPRESS THEIR SEXUAL OR GENDER IDENTITIES?

People seek out or attempt LGBTQ+ change and suppression because they have been taught that there is something wrong or broken about having a diverse sexuality or gender identity. The so-called “science” quoted against people of a different sexualities or genders is usually outdated and discredited. Our own families and loved ones may want what they believe is best for us, but they may have been misled.

Many survivors of conversion practices report being subjected to pseudo-scientific ideas. These include claims about “causes” of being LGBTQ+, such as the idea that childhood abuse or trauma leads people to become LGBTQ+, as well as claims about LGBTQ+ people being dysfunctional or unable to live whole, healthy lives. Prominent survivor groups have reported that these claims cause significant harm and distress to LGBTQ+ people. In fact, these completely baseless ideas may damage families and lead to lifelong mental health issues.

But human understandings and experiences of sexuality and gender have not been constant over time and have changed a lot in the last 50 years. Our religious traditions have been slow to adapt to these changes. Gender and sexuality are the areas for which religious leaders report feeling least equipped to provide counselling and support.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Australian Institute of Family Counselling (2017). ‘Get Equipped: Responding to the growing mental health needs in our churches and communities’. Australian Institute of Family Counselling Report. <https://www.aifc.com.au/equipped/>

While change and suppression, or conversion practices are known to be present in parts of all religions, all faith traditions also have a range of views about human gender and sexuality, including views that welcome, affirm and celebrate LGBTQ+ people.

LGBTQ+ people of faith want nothing more than to practice their faith without feeling as if they are lesser because of their sexuality or gender. None of them want to hear messages of rejection or restrictions on the way they can live or love from their congregations, friends or families.

LGBTQ+ people of faith who have considered, been offered, or undergone change and suppression practices have gone on to have the best health and spiritual outcomes when they have found a way to accept, integrate and celebrate their gender, sexual and spiritual identities.

Please note, religious LGBTQ+ change and suppression practices have not included forced medical interventions on people born with intersex variations. Hence this fact sheet’s focus on “LGBTQ+” but not “I” practices. Although, of course, some intersex people are LGBTQ+ and have been subject to religious LGBTQ+ change and suppression practices.



## WHO CAN HELP?

### BRAVE NETWORK

Brave Network is a support and advocacy group for LGBTIQ+ people of faith and allies.

<https://thebravenetwork.org/contact/>

### AGMC

The Australian GLBTIQ Multicultural Council is a national body that advocates for the rights of multicultural and multifaith LGBTIQ individuals and communities.

<https://www.agmc.org.au/>

Email: [contact@agmc.org.au](mailto:contact@agmc.org.au)

### QUEERSPACE

Queerspace is an LGBTIQ+ health and wellbeing support service with a focus on relationships, families, parenting and young people, and offers co-located services across the north-west metropolitan region of Victoria. Queerspace is involved in the development of specialised support for survivors of LGBTQ+ conversion practices.

<https://www.queerspace.org.au/>

Email: [enquiries@ds.org.au](mailto:enquiries@ds.org.au)

Call: 03 9663 6733

### RAINBOW DOOR

Rainbow Door is a free helpline run by Switchboard Victoria which supports LGBTIQ+ Victorians, their friends and family during the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic and beyond. The service can provide LGBTIQ+ specialist, multidisciplinary support for family violence, mental health and relationship issues. Rainbow Door operates 7 days a week between 10am– 6pm

Call: 1800 729 367

Text: 0480 017 246

Email: [support@rainbowdoor.com.au](mailto:support@rainbowdoor.com.au)

### SWITCHBOARD VICTORIA

Switchboard Victoria is a community-based not for profit organisation that provides a peer based, volunteer run support service for LGBTQI (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and intersex) people and their friends, families and allies.

Call: 1800 184 527

Chat online (3pm–midnight): <https://qlife.org.au/>

### THORNE HARBOUR HEALTH

Thorne Harbour Health provides professional, affordable counselling for members of LGBTIQ+ communities and individuals or couples who are affected by or at risk of HIV.

<https://thorneharbour.org/lgbti-health/>

Email: [support@thorneharbour.org](mailto:support@thorneharbour.org)

Call: 1800 961 780 (9am–5pm Monday to Friday)



## WHERE CAN I FIND OUT MORE?

SOGICE Survivor Statement (2020). <http://sogicesurvivors.com.au/>

Bishop, A. (2019). Harmful Treatment: The Global Reach of so-called Conversion Therapy. New York: OutRight International.

[https://outrightinternational.org/sites/default/files/ConversionFINAL\\_1.pdf](https://outrightinternational.org/sites/default/files/ConversionFINAL_1.pdf)

Jones, T.W., Brown, A., Carnie, L., Fletcher, G., & Leonard, W. (2018). Preventing Harm, Promoting Justice: Responding to LGBT conversion therapy in Australia. Melbourne: HRLC & GLHV.

<https://www.hrlc.org.au/reports/preventing-harm>

What We Know Project (2017). 'What does the scholarly research say about whether conversion therapy can alter sexual orientation without causing harm?' Ithaca: Center for the Study of Inequality, Cornell University. <https://whatweknow.inequality.cornell.edu/>