

SUPPORTING SURVIVORS OF CONVERSION THERAPY

tips and resources for service providers

The Canadian Criminal Code describes conversion therapy as “a practice, treatment or service designed to:

- a. change a person’s sexual orientation to heterosexual;
- b. change a person’s gender identity to cisgender;
- c. change a person’s gender expression so that it conforms to the sex assigned to the person at birth;
- d. repress or reduce non-heterosexual attraction or sexual behaviour;
- e. repress a person’s non-cisgender gender identity; or
- f. repress or reduce a person’s gender expression that does not conform to the sex assigned to the person at birth.”

In other words, the law defines conversion therapy as practices which try to change someone’s 2SLGBTQIA+ identity, expression, or behaviour to conform to heterosexual and/or cisgender norms.

Others define conversion therapy as part of a broader spectrum of “sexual orientation and gender identity and expression change efforts” (SOGIECE). This spectrum includes “any form of efforts, explicit or implicit, which pressure someone to deny, suppress, or change their sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression to heterosexual and/or cisgender” ([CBRC, 2023](#)).

Offering support to someone who is a survivor of conversion therapy or related practices can feel intimidating, but it is important. Here are some tips, learning resources, and places to refer someone to if they disclose that they are a survivor of conversion therapy, and/or bring up conversion therapy with you in any context.

TIPS

1

Learn to spot conversion therapy

Practitioners of conversion therapy use a variety of coded language to advertise their practices while avoiding public scrutiny or legal consequences. Recognizing this language is important when making client referrals or deciding on partnerships. This language is constantly changing, but may include:

- phrases or descriptions such as “reorientation” or “reparative” therapy
- describing people as “struggling with homosexual feelings”
- phrases like “same-sex attraction” as opposed to identity terms like gay or lesbian
- the term “rapid-onset gender dysphoria” or materials which describe trans identities using a “social contagion” framework
- “watchful waiting” approaches to trans or gender creative children
- “ex-gay” ministries or organizations
- “autogynephilia” or other language which treats trans selfhood as a sexual fetish behaviour as opposed to an identity
- language which suggests 2SLGBTQIA+ identities are incompatible with someone’s faith
- language which suggests that 2SLGBTQIA+ identities are the result of trauma, abuse, or “grooming”
- language which implies or states that a cisgender or heterosexual identity would be the preferred outcome of a counselling process

Conversion therapy can show up in many different forms, including religious counselling, secular counselling, medical settings, “support groups,” summer camps, online resources, and more.

2

Meet people where they are at

Clients who are experiencing or have experienced conversion therapy might be feeling many different things, and might be at many different points in their identity journeys. Actively listen to them when they share their experiences, use the language they are using to describe themselves and their experiences, and ask them what they need. Most importantly, make it clear that you believe them and their story—after the invalidating experience of conversion therapy practices, being taken seriously can be a crucial step towards healing.

3

Trauma-informed care

Trauma-informed care is a set of principles guiding health and social services to better serve their clients. This includes recognizing that many of us have experienced trauma, that this may impact our health and wellbeing when accessing care, and that health and social services should integrate this knowledge into their practices to avoid re-traumatizing clients. Key principles of trauma-informed care include creating a sense of safety, respecting autonomy and working in collaboration with clients, and understanding and acknowledging structural sources of trauma such as systems of oppression and historical harms.

Being trauma-informed in your approach to working with survivors of conversion therapy can look like many different things, but at its core it means understanding that conversion therapy can be traumatic, and that people might react in various different ways to this trauma, and that it is your responsibility as a service provider to anticipate and work with this trauma.

You might already practice a trauma-informed approach in your work, or you might be new to the idea. Regardless, it is a good idea to reflect on the traumas which result from conversion therapy, and how to integrate that knowledge into your practice. For an overview of trauma-informed care, check out [this intro from the Trauma-Informed Care Implementation Resource Center](#).

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Create an inclusive environment

Making sure your organization or practice is clearly and meaningfully inclusive of 2SLGBTQIA+ communities can go a long way to making survivors of conversion therapy feel safer and more comfortable seeking support. This can look like physical design choices such as rainbow flags and images of sexual and gender diversity. It can and should also go deeper. Do you have 2SLGBTQIA+-specific programming? Are all your programs trans-inclusive? How about your washrooms or changing rooms? Do you have 2SLGBTQIA+ individuals working at all levels of the organization, including in decision-making roles?

And inclusion doesn't stop there. Remember that 2SLGBTQIA+ folks come from all walks of life and experience other intersecting identities. Ensuring your space is wheelchair accessible, that it is welcoming of racialized clients, and that your

services are financially accessible are all also important aspects of 2SLGBTQIA+ inclusion. As well, providing links to 2SLGBTQIA+-affirming faith groups, offering prayer spaces, and acknowledging a wide range of religious holidays are all efforts which can increase the comfort level of conversion therapy survivors who may be looking for ways to reconcile their identity with their faith.

For more information on creating an inclusive environment, check out our reflection tool resource.

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Take the time for self-reflection

Think about where you might have knowledge gaps, misconceptions, or personal biases when it comes to conversion therapy or to 2SLGBTQ+ identities. You can use our toolkit and other resources to learn more about conversion therapy, reflect on your past experiences and how they’ve shaped your perspectives, and be more equipped to support survivors of conversion therapy in your practice. Check out our self reflection tool here.

REFERRALS

Connecting with other people who share experiences of conversion therapy can help survivors process those experiences. The Community Based Resource Centre has some resources for connecting with fellow survivors (see below).

It is also important when providing referrals to 2SLGBTQIA+ and questioning clients that you vet these resources for conversion therapy red flags. Consider building a list of trusted referrals that you know are inclusive of 2SLGBTQIA+ people.

FURTHER LEARNING

- Our toolkit
- [The Community Based Resource Centre’s SOGIECE resources](#)
- [Let Me Be Me: a legal Information Guide to Canada’s Conversion Therapy Ban](#), from Legal Aid Nova Scotia