

# LGBTQ+ Youth & Mental Health

Mental Health Professionals Handout from Prism Youth Community

According to the Journal of Pediatrics and the Human Rights Campaign, much evidence has found that societal prejudice causes significant medical and psychological harms to LGBT people:

**8**  
TIMES

More than 8 times as likely to have attempted suicide

**6**  
TIMES

Nearly 6 times as likely to report high levels of depression

**3**  
TIMES

More than 3 times as likely to use illegal drugs

**3**  
TIMES

More than 3 times as likely to be at high risk for HIV and STDs



Youth questioning their sexual orientation reported more<sup>1</sup>

bullying

homophobic  
victimization

unexcused  
absences  
from school

drug use

feelings of  
depression

suicidal  
behaviors

<sup>1</sup> Birkett M, Espelage DL, Koenig B. LGB and questioning students in schools: The moderating effects of homophobic bullying and school climate on negative outcomes. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence* 2009; 38: 989–1000.



## 10 Things I Wish My Mental Health Professional Knew from Prism Youth Community

# 1

**Be willing to learn.** Allow yourself to listen to a client if you say something that hurts them because of their orientation or identity and be open to learning about why the situation was hurtful. Create an environment where your client feels comfortable speaking up. Because of the power differential between you and your client, it can be especially helpful to communicate that they can tell you if you have committed a microaggression against them.

**Example** In a therapy session, a clinician asks their female-identifying youth client if she has a boyfriend. The client explains that she has a girlfriend and felt that her sexual orientation was invalidated when the clinician assumed she was heterosexual. While the clinician did not intend to invalidate the client, the clinician understood the impact of their words and discussed with the youth how they could communicate with her more respectfully.

# 2

**Use affirming therapies.** Research and practice therapy strategies that affirm and validate the gender identities and sexual orientations of your clients. Seek supervision of a therapist that has experience working with LGBTQ+ clients. Do not practice outside of your competency. If you are not comfortable working with LGBTQ+ clients, refer them to another therapist.

**Example** Leelah Alcorn, a transgender girl who took her life on December 28, 2014, is a prominent example of the harmful effects of conversion therapy – a therapy that attempts to alter or change someone’s gender identity or sexual orientation. Leelah cited conversion therapy and its failure to do anything but worsen her depression as a reason for her suicide.

# 3

**Respect clients’ gender pronouns, gender expressions, & preferred names.** Your client’s gender pronouns cannot be assumed by observing their gender expression. Use your client’s preferred gender pronouns and names even when they are not present. If you make a mistake, quickly correct yourself and move on. If requested by the client, support parents and the family in learning names and pronouns, and supporting the client’s gender expression.

**Example** You can introduce yourself using preferred gender pronouns – *My name is Dr. Stiles and I use he/him/his pronouns* to communicate competency and allyship with varying gender identities.

**Example** You can open up space for youth to tell you how to create a safer environment – *How can I make our agency safer for you?*



# 4

**Be aware of microaggressions.** Microaggressions are verbal, nonverbal, and environmental slights, snubs, or insults, intentional or unintentional that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative messages that target individuals based on their marginalized group membership.

**Example** Asking for a client's "real name" when they are using a preferred name is microaggressive because while it was not blatantly transphobic, it implies that their preferred name is not real or valid. If you need access to a client's legal name for billing purposes, kindly explain the billing process and that for this purpose only, you need to ask what their *legal* (not *real*) name is.

# 5

**Maintain confidentiality.** Do not disclose a client's gender identity or sexual orientation to anyone without their explicit permission. Nonconsensual disclosure disrespects their privacy and can lead to an increased risk of homelessness, suicidal ideation, and emotional and physical abuse in the home. Ask the client if they want their preferred name and gender pronouns to be used on paperwork and when speaking with guardians and family. Make sure the client understands what documentation may or may not be accessible to guardians (so as not to "out" the client).

# 6

**Build inclusive policies.** Clients should feel safe and comfortable coming to your session. There are many ways you can build an LGBTQ+ inclusive environment. Make gender neutral restrooms available in your facility. Keep client notes discrete, especially if it is a minor who is not "out" to their family. When at all possible, use preferred names on documentation (e.g. client notes and intake forms).

**Example** A non-binary client is coming for their first therapy session with you after experiencing significant distress due to transphobia in their school and home environments. When they arrive at your office, they need to use the restroom. With no gender neutral restrooms available, they are not comfortable using the restroom (especially with other clients and parents in view). By the time they reach the session, they are quiet and unresponsive, feeling invalidated in the therapeutic environment and physically uncomfortable.

# 7

**Do not assume queer identities are roots of mental health problems.** Varying gender identities and sexual orientations do not cause mental health concerns. Rather, societal and environmental discrimination can cause mental health concerns.

**Example** Recently, bills have been introduced across the country to criminalize or prevent trans youth for using their preferred restrooms. Transphobia on a systemic level can contribute to mental health issues.



# 8

**Accept youths' identities at any age.** Never tell a youth that their sexual orientation or gender identity is not valid because they are too young to know for sure. People who are queer have to confront their minority statuses on a day-to-day basis because societal norms cause them to be hyper-aware of their identities from a fairly young age.

**Example** One harmful thing for queer youth to hear is – *This is just a phase*. Saying this implies that even if a youth thinks they know themselves, they are wrong. It implies that the youth is incapable of knowing themselves. On top of that, it says that trying things out is wrong. Youth should be allowed to test out their identities and see what feels right for them. Youth should be allowed safe places to learn something about themselves they might not have otherwise.

# 9

**Take initiative to learn on your own.** Utilize the books, online resources, and community educational events to learn about LGBTQA+ competencies independently. Communicate to clients that you are willing to learn independently. Do not expect queer clients to be experts on every queer issue. Do not ask a queer client an invasive question you wouldn't ask a cisgender/heterosexual client. Attend other trainings/workshops on sexual orientation and gender identity when available to continue the learning process.

**Example** Become familiar with the resources provided by GLSEN and the Trevor Project.

# 10

**Be a visible ally.** Do not make youth guess whether or not you and your agency are allies. Use your office space and your language to communicate that you are supportive of queer youth.

**Examples** When requested by a client, therapists can be a good resource for facilitating conversations between clients and guardians/family about gender identity and sexual orientation. Have resources available in your office for guardians and families. Remember that a client's safety is more important than their guardian's comfort.

**Examples** Be vocally supportive. Correct staff (with client permission) who are using the wrong names and pronouns. Take client concerns seriously about issues with teachers, staff, and peers who are engaging in harassment, bullying, and microaggression.

## WHY IT MATTERS

Following these suggestions will help you create a safer and more inclusive environment for LGBTQ+ youth. When youth feel safe, their ability to participate and engage with your services increases exponentially!



# LGBTQA+ Terminology

## Mental Health Professionals Handout from Prism Youth Community

These definitions were borrowed and adapted from several sources, including the University of California - LA LGBT Campus Resource Center, the University of California Berkeley Gender Equity Resource Center, the University of Michigan Spectrum Center, and the University of Wisconsin Milwaukee LGBT Resource Center. Definitions may vary with location, era, and culture. It is very important to respect people's desired self-identifications. One should never assume another person's identity based on that person's appearance. It is always best to ask people how they identify, including what pronouns they prefer, and to respect their wishes.

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### → Identities, Expressions, & Orientations ←

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**Ally** – Typically any non-LGBT person who supports and stands up for the rights of LGBT people, though LGBT people can be allies, such as a lesbian who is an ally to a transgender person.

**Androgynous** – A person appearing and/or identifying as neither man nor woman, presenting a gender either mixed or neutral.

**Asexual** – A person who is not sexually attracted to any gender or does not have a sexual orientation. Asexuality is not the same as celibacy.

**Bisexual** or **Bi** – A person emotionally, physically, and/or sexually attracted to males/men and females/women. This attraction does not have to be equally split between genders and there may be a preference for one gender over others.

**Cisgender** – A person who feels comfortable with the gender identity and gender expression expectations assigned to them based on their physical sex.

**Gender Expression** – The way in which a person expresses their gender identity through clothing, behavior, posture, mannerisms, speech patterns, activities, and more.

**Gender Identity** – A person's sense of being masculine, feminine, or other gendered.

**Genderqueer** – A gender variant person whose gender identity is neither male nor female, is between or beyond genders, or is some combination of genders.

**Homosexual** or **Gay** – A person primarily emotionally, physically, and/or sexually attracted to members of the same sex.

**Intersex** — A person whose sexual anatomy or chromosomes do not fit with the traditional markers of "female" and "male." For example: people born with both "female" and "male" anatomy (penis, testicles, vagina, uterus); people born with XXY.

**Lesbian** – Term used to describe female-identified people attracted romantically, erotically, and/or emotionally to other female-identified people.

**LGBTIQA+** - Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, queer, asexual or ally, and other identities.

**Pansexual** – A person who is sexually attracted to all or many gender expressions.

**Partner** – A significant other in an intimate relationship; a gender neutral alternative to boyfriend/girlfriend, husband/wife, or other binary-based relationship terms.

**Queer** – 1. An umbrella term which embraces a matrix of sexual preferences, orientations, and habits of the not-exclusively- heterosexual-and-monogamous majority. 2. A reclaimed word that was formerly used solely as a slur but that has been semantically overturned by some members of the LGBTQA+ community, who use it as a term of defiant pride.

**Sex** - A medical term designating a certain combination of gonads, chromosomes, external gender organs, secondary sex characteristics and hormonal balances.



**Sexual Orientation** – The desire for intimate emotional and/or sexual relationships with people of the same gender/sex, another gender/sex, or multiple genders/sexes.

**Sexuality** – A person’s exploration of sexual acts, sexual orientation, sexual pleasure, and desire.

**Trans** - An abbreviation that is sometimes used to refer to a gender variant person. This use allows a person to state a gender variant identity without having to disclose hormonal or surgical status/intentions. This term is sometimes used to refer to the gender variant community as a whole.

**Transgender** – An umbrella term for a person whose gender identity, expression or behavior is different from those typically associated with their assigned sex at birth.

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➔ **Transitions** ←

**Bottom Surgery** – Surgery on the genitals designed to create a body in harmony with a person’s preferred gender expression.

**Gender Confirming Surgery** – Medical surgeries used to modify one’s body to be more congruent with one’s gender identity.

**Passing** – Describes a person's ability to be accepted as their preferred gender/sex or race/ethnic identity or to be seen as heterosexual.

**Top Surgery** - This term usually refers to surgery for the construction of a maletype chest, but may also refer to breast augmentation.

**Transition** – This term is primarily used to refer to the process a gender variant person undergoes when changing their bodily appearance either to be more congruent with the gender/sex they feel themselves to be and/or to be in harmony with their preferred gender expression.

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➔ **Oppression** ←

**Biphobia** - The fear of, discrimination against, or hatred of bisexuals, which is often times related to the current binary standard. Biphobia can be seen within the LGBTQA+ community, as well as in general society.

**Gender Binary** – The idea that there are only two genders – male/female or man/woman – and that a person must be strictly gendered as either/or.

**Heteronormativity** – The assumption, in individuals or in institutions, that everyone is heterosexual, and that heterosexuality is superior to homosexuality and bisexuality.

**Heterosexism** – Prejudice against individuals and groups who display nonheterosexual behaviors or identities, combined with the majority power to impose such prejudice. Usually used to the advantage of the group in power.

**Heterosexual Privilege** –Those benefits derived automatically by being heterosexual that are denied to homosexuals and bisexuals.

**Homophobia** – The irrational fear or hatred of homosexuals, homosexuality, or any behavior or belief that does not conform to rigid sex role stereotypes.

**Outing** – Involuntary disclosure of one’s sexual orientation, gender identity, or intersex status.

**Transphobia** – The irrational fear of those who are gender variant and/or the inability to deal with gender ambiguity.

**Triangle** - A symbol of remembrance. Gay men in the Nazi concentration camps were forced to wear the pink triangle as a designation of being homosexual. Women who did not conform to social roles, often believed to be lesbians, had to wear the black triangle. The triangles are worn today as symbols of freedom, reminding us to never forget.



# Using Pronouns

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You can't always know what someone's preferred gender pronoun is by looking at them. Asking and correctly using someone's pronoun is one of the most basic ways to show your respect for their gender identity.

### Asking clients what their pronouns are

In private, ask, "What pronouns do you use?" and "Who is it okay to use them around?" If you are asking as part of an introduction exercise, you can quickly explain what a preferred gender pronoun is: "Tell us your name, what school you come from, and your personal pronoun. That means the pronoun that you use in reference to yourself. For example, I'm Nala, I attended Jackson Creek and I like to be referred to with he/him/his pronouns."

### Mis-gendering

If you make a mistake, it's okay! Everyone slips up from time to time. If you use the wrong pronoun for someone, say something right away, like "Sorry, I meant she." If you realize your mistake after the fact, apologize in private and move on. In your agency, you may hear someone using the wrong pronoun for a youth. Gently correct them without further embarrassing the youth who has been mis-gendered. This means saying something like "Actually, Xena uses the pronoun she," and then moving on. If other youth or colleagues are consistently using the wrong pronouns for someone, do not ignore it! It is important to let queer youth know that you are their ally.

	Subject	Object	Possessive Adjective	Possessive Pronoun	Reflexive
Female	She	Her	Her	Hers	Herself
Male	He	Him	His	His	Himself
Gender Neutral	They	Them	Their	Theirs	Themselves
Gender Neutral	Ze	Hir	Hir	Hirs	Hirself

### Examples of how to use pronouns:

<u>She</u> went to <u>her</u> bedroom.	I am <u>her</u> sister.	<u>She</u> shaves <u>herself</u> .
<u>He</u> went to <u>his</u> bedroom.	I am <u>his</u> sister.	<u>He</u> shaves <u>himself</u> .
<u>They</u> went to <u>their</u> bedroom.	I am <u>their</u> sister.	<u>They</u> shave <u>themselves</u> .
<u>Ze</u> went to <u>hir</u> bedroom.	I am <u>hir</u> sister.	<u>Ze</u> shaves <u>hirself</u> .

**This list is not comprehensive.**

**You can find more information and additional terms at the links below:**

<http://www.lgbt.ucla.edu/documents/LGBTTerminology.pdf>  
[http://geneq.berkeley.edu/lgbt\\_resources\\_definiton\\_of\\_terms](http://geneq.berkeley.edu/lgbt_resources_definiton_of_terms)  
<https://internationalspectrum.umich.edu/life/definitions>  
<https://uwm.edu/lgbtrc/support/gender-pronouns/>



# Resources for Further Education

## **Mental Health Professionals Handout from Prism Youth Community**

**Gay, Lesbian & Straight Education Network (GLSEN)** – This national organization is focused on creating a safe environment for students who are part of the GLBTQ+ community. They provide educational resources for educators to use in their school community and also provide resources for student-led efforts to make the classroom and school setting a safer and more positive place. You can find these resources or join their educators' network at [www.glsen.org](http://www.glsen.org).

**The Trevor Project** – This is a national organization that focuses on crisis intervention and suicide prevention services for students in the GLBTQ+ community. Their suicide prevention hotline is available to call or text 24/7 at 866-488-7386. The Trevor Project also provides educational resources for both youth and adults as well as educational resources for the school community.

**StopBullying.gov** – This online resource explains how a safe environment can be created for youth who identify as GLBTQ+ in the classroom, at home, and in the community. In addition, it provides an overview on legal statutes and civil rights laws apply to GLBTQ+ issues and provides additional government resources for education on GLBTQ+ bullying. Visit <http://www.stopbullying.gov/at-risk/groups/lgbt/index.html> to see the information of this campaign specific to LGBTQ+ students.

**Human Rights Campaign** – This organization that works towards equal rights for members of the LGBTQ+ community provides information and resources about creating an inclusive learning environment for students. They have also have many campaigns that are engaging with educational communities across the country to help create safe learning environments. You can find information at <http://www.hrc.org/topics/children-youth>.

**Cyberbullying.org** – This resource focuses on the education and prevention of cyber bullying. Youth are engaging in an ever-expanding world of social media, and the virtual world is becoming a more dangerous place for LGBTQ+ youth. Here you can find resources for educators, parents, and teens to help learn where and when cyber bullying takes place, who is vulnerable, and how to help prevent it. To learn more, or to report a case of cyber bullying, visit [cyberbullying.org](http://cyberbullying.org).

**Gender Spectrum** – This resource allows those looking to expand their knowledge of the gender spectrum and other various topics about gender identification. To learn more about gender in youth as well as events and workshops concerning gender, go to [genderspectrum.org](http://genderspectrum.org).

**Love is Respect** – It is important to promote healthy relationships among all youth, and youth in the GLBTQ+ community are no exception. To find information for youth about healthy relationships (GLBTQ+ or not) as well as for youth to engage with a trained individual and ask questions about their relationship they can call 866-331-9474 or text loveis to 22522 or visit <http://www.loveisrespect.org/healthy-relationships/healthy-lgbtq-relationships/>.

**Growing Up GLBT in America** – This is a collection of studies and reports done on what growing up in America is like for a GLBT youth. This is a great place to start on educating yourself on some of the challenges faced by students that will find their way into your classrooms.



# Prism Youth Community Helpers and Presenters

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Listed below are the names, preferred gender pronouns, grade, and school of all the presenters.

**Becca** – she/her/hers – Freshman at BHS South

**Esther** – she/her/hers – Freshman at BHS South

**Issac** – he/him/his – Junior at The Academy of Science and Entrepreneurship

**Piper** – he/him/his – Sophomore at Ivy Tech Community College

**Spencer** – he/him/his – Senior at BHS South

**Laura Ingram** – she/her/hers – Director of Prism Youth Community – [laura.ingram@bloomingtonpride.org](mailto:laura.ingram@bloomingtonpride.org)

