

SPIRITUAL CARE

considerations series



The Spiritual Care Considerations series equips all carers with basic information to help you think about the spiritual needs of the person in your care. They are a prompt to give you ideas for conversation with the person you are supporting and/or their loved ones. Meaningful Ageing Australia members can access more information under the Member's Zone Resources Clearing House www.meaningfulageing.org.au

Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual Older People

This *Consideration* aims to give you the tools to address the spiritual needs of the older person who identifies as lesbian, gay or bisexual (LGB). It is one part of a three-part Spiritual Care Consideration for lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans/gender diverse or intersex (LGBTI people). People who identify as LGB should always be seen and treated as people first. Inclusive practice is more than saying "we treat everyone the same". Part of this is recognising that people from LGBTI communities are not all alike. Though they share a history of discrimination and movements in human rights, each group have specific needs and within each group is a lot of diversity. Some people need more of your help and understanding.

Terms and definitions

Sexual orientation: Describes a person's sexual or emotional attraction to another person based on that other person's sex and/or gender. The term is restricted in law to sex only and refers to attraction to persons of: the same sex (gay and lesbian); different sex (heterosexual); or persons attracted to more than one gender (bisexual or pansexual).

Heterosexual: a person who is physically and emotionally attracted to members of the opposite sex.

Lesbian: a female who is physically and emotionally attracted to another female.

Gay: a person who is physically and emotionally attracted to another person of the same sex. Most commonly applied to men, although some women use this term.

Bisexual: a person who is physically and emotionally attracted to more than one gender.

Homophobia: negative attitudes and feelings towards people who identify as or are perceived to be lesbian or gay. Homophobia supports fear, violence and intolerance towards LGBTI people and discrimination in policy and practice.

Biphobia: negative attitudes and feelings towards people who identify as or are perceived to be bisexual. Biphobia supports fear, violence and intolerance towards bisexual people and discrimination in policy and practice. Is separate from homophobia and can originate from any, heterosexual, gay or lesbian people

Coming out: a process through which an LGBTI person comes to recognise and acknowledge to themselves and /or others their sexual or gender identity. This is a reoccurring event whenever the person makes a decision to disclose to new people in different settings.

1. How your beliefs influence your care

Many of us have grown up with negative messages about the LGBTI communities, that they are wrong or immoral and some people still feel this way. This can understandably make you feel uncomfortable caring for an older LGBTI person. If this is causing you personal grief or inner conflict to the point where it is affecting your work, it is important to raise this with your team leaders to discuss your options. Inclusive practice is not about trying to change you or your values, but ensuring that everyone is treated with respect.

2. Spiritual needs and the influence of history

- Older LGB people have spiritual needs like everyone else. They have the need to belong, feel safe and have meaningful connections with others, nature, creativity and for some, God. For these connections to occur the person needs to feel safe.
- Older LGB people will often have a deep fear about the care they will receive if they tell you about their identity.
- Some people have been put in jail, had to pretend they were heterosexual, lost their jobs and the right to parent their own children. Many people have been subject to brutal force and violence because of who they are and whom they love.
- For many older LGB people, they find comfort in their faith but this can be complicated. Many older LGB people have experienced rejection from their friends, family and their faith community. This has caused deep spiritual distress.
- Some LGB people have been taught that even God rejects them. You could say: *We are inclusive and non-judgemental at (*your organisation), you are safe here and we will do our best to make you feel comfortable.*

3. Families of choice

- Family can sometimes be a very sensitive subject for an older LGB person. They may not have had the opportunity to have children of their own, or have been forced to distance themselves from their children by the state or by their family. Some older LGB people who have been public about their identity have created “families of choice.” These are friends they have made who provide all the love and support a family would. You could say: *Tell me about the people who support you.*
- In the past, it was seen to be appropriate to make attempts to ‘cure’ the person who was same-sex attracted. Often the local minister would be called to perform some rituals and prayer, or a doctor would prescribe heavy medication and in some cases, perform shock therapies.
- Forcing same sex attracted people to heterosexual sex was also common practice. These practices are unethical and a violation of human rights.
- This history has led to older LGBTI people feeling a distrust of institutions and a deep fear of discrimination within services. This fear can lead to the older person to prefer not to disclose their status.
- Up until 2012, faith-based organisations could refuse care to a person who identified as LGBTI. Since this is a fairly new policy, many older people will still feel they are not welcome in faith-based organisations.

4. Give clues that you care

- You could be looking after an older person who has not yet told anyone about their sexual preference. You could say: *We care for people from all backgrounds here.*
- Use LGB inclusive language. Instead of assuming an older woman has a husband, you could ask: *Do you have a partner who supports you?* Instead of assuming the older person has children, you could ask: *Tell me about your family.*
- If the older person you care for has a same sex partner, acknowledge them and make them feel welcome. It’s likely that this person has been their primary carer for as long as they could.
- Use their language: if they refer to each other as friends, call them friends. If they refer to each other as partners, call them partners. If they use husband or wife, use husband or wife.
- Show genuine interest and use respectful terms. It’s okay to admit what you don’t know, but don’t expect the older person to educate you about their personal lives.
- Find common ground and points of connection. Most LGB people do not want to be defined by their sexuality. You might both enjoy the same kind of movies, football team or the beach, for example.

Older lesbian women

- Many older lesbians did not identify as a lesbian till later in their lives. Some married and started families and the older person coming out might have also caused a disruption in the family.
- While many families have been supportive of the older person, many more have not. Many older lesbians have become socially isolated when they identify or are perceived to be a lesbian.
- Older lesbian women have been vulnerable to sexism, homophobia and sexual assault. Family members of older lesbians sometimes arranged for them to be raped at a young age in an attempt to change them. This may mean that the older woman in your care could be fearful of male workers and trusting others.

For more resources and links to useful reading for your own information on lesbian, gay and bisexual older people, visit the Meaningful Ageing website Member’s Zone. *With thanks to Dr Sue Malta (National Ageing Research Institute), Reverend John Clarke and Reverend Judy Angwin (Uniting AgeWell) and Brenda Appleton for their assistance in preparing this Consideration.*