Declaration on Avoiding Harm

A RECONCILIATION AND GROWTH PROJECT STATEMENT

We advocate for self-determination and avoiding harm when dealing with sexuality, gender identity, and faith:

Self-determination requires that providers who engage in counseling services:
• See each client as a multifaceted person with the right to explore, define, and live out their own life path;
• Use approaches that are respectful and compassionate to all lived experiences regarding sexuality, gender identity, and faith.

Avoiding harm means that providers who engage in counseling services:
• Foster an individual's intellectual, emotional, and psychological development;
• Convey to the individual that they are lovable, of value, and not defective;
• Assert an individual's right to determine their own standards rather than unquestioningly adopting the expectations of other persons, institutions, or customs.

These approaches are potentially harmful:

Violating professional ethics and guidelines:
• Assuming that people are necessarily mentally ill or exhibiting a learned, reactive, or addictive behavior if they experience sexual and/or gender diversity and/or a deep devotion to faith;
• Assuming that every client's experience adheres to a one-size-fits-all model or theory;
• Violating the sexual boundaries of the client, such as using any nudity in sessions and inappropriately disclosing personal information from the provider;
• Not addressing the effects of minority stress;
• Not assessing the client's unique experience with religion, faith, sexuality, and/or gender identity;
• Failing to explore family systems and cultural and ethnic traditions.

Using coercive techniques:
• Uses direct or indirect manipulation, pharmacological interventions, or aversive techniques, such as punishment and shock therapy, to achieve a specific outcome regarding sexual orientation, gender identity, or faith;
• Asking voyeuristic questions of the client that reflect the counselor's curiosity rather than the client's need to share.

Fostering expectations of predetermined outcomes:
• Basing treatment on the assumption that a change in sexual orientation or gender identity will or should occur;
• Encouraging expectations of a specific sexual orientation, gender identity, or faith outcome;
• Limiting the client's exploration of sexuality orientation, gender identity, personal values, or faith.

Failing to follow principles of good practice:
• Not assessing potential for suicide or self-harm;
• Not inquiring periodically about the client's feelings regarding counseling, not asking if they feel understood, and not making adjustments or appropriate referrals during the counseling process.

Imposing external values upon the client's belief system:
• Urging the client to discard beliefs about their religion, faith, sexuality, or gender identity;
• Denigrating the quality of life for a client's preferred life path regarding sexual, gender, and/or faith diversity.

This declaration applies to the spectrum of sexual and gender diversity, whether an individual identifies as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, a different label, or chooses not to identify according to sexual attraction or gender experiences.

For the purposes of this declaration, this is how the following terms have been used:

Faith means a person's adherence to beliefs, practices, and rituals of that person's spirituality and/or religion.
Gender identity means the way a person interprets and labels their gendered experience.
Minority stress means chronic stress resulting from discrimination, prejudice, and/or lack of acknowledgment.
Religion means an identification with a religious organization and its doctrines, principles, and practices.
Sexual orientation means a persistent pattern of erotic arousal and attraction. This may or may not be consistent with a person's preferred sexual and romantic expression and identity.
Sexuality means a person's erotic and romantic feelings, expression, and identity.

Faith, gender, and sexuality may be core aspects of a person and/or may be shaped by cultural influences.

Last update: February 1, 2019. To provide feedback, please go to ReconciliationAndGrowth.org