

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.

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.

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.

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 refers to the sex-related behaviors and traits ascribed by the culture and the sex-related characteristics that individuals experience and assign to themselves. Gender is different from the biological sex of male, female, or intersex individuals.

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 attraction and aversion. 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: October 3, 2019. To provide feedback, please go to ReconciliationAndGrowth.org