



Understanding the Dangers of Conversion Therapy: Three Reasons to Say NO

Side by Side has over 25 years of experience working with lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and questioning (LGBTQ+) youth in Central Virginia. We have seen firsthand the damage and pain conversion therapy causes in our community, and in particular to LGBTQ+ youth. We offer this quick and easy guide for all to better understand what conversion therapy is and how dangerous it can be.

What is conversion therapy?

Conversion therapy, sometimes called reparative therapy or sexual reorientation, is the name given to the collective practices that attempt to change someone's sexual orientation or gender identity. Common tactics include a variety of cognitive, behavioral, psychoanalytic, and other practices which can include extreme measures such as electrical shocking, snapping an elastic band on the individual's wrist, and shaming. Patients are taught heterosexual dating skills, are taught to be more stereotypically "masculine" or "feminine," are exposed to hypnosis, and medicated¹.

Why would someone try conversion therapy?

LGBTQ+ people often face intense discrimination, isolation, and violence from society and sometimes even from their own family. Conversion therapy appeals to LGBTQ+ individuals who are looking to escape the homophobia and transphobia they experience. Parents and other family members of LGBTQ+ youth may see conversion therapy as a helpful solution to the pain their children experience. However, the truth is conversion therapy is harmful, dangerous, and ineffective.

If LGBTQ+ youth are experiencing depression, violence, and more, shouldn't they change?

While it is true that the distress LGBTQ+ youth experience is significant, it is not caused by their LGBTQ+ identity. The hurt many LGBTQ+ youth experience can be attributed to social factors, such as stigma, prejudice, and discrimination. These factors create a hostile and stressful social environment wherein the stresses of experiencing prejudice, social rejection, feeling forced to hide and conceal one's identity, internalized homophobia, and unhealthy coping processes compound and have a negative impact on mental health.²

Rather than suggesting that the youth change themselves, "stigma can be reduced through community interventions, supportive client-centered approaches, and family reconciliation techniques that focus on strengthening the emotional ties of family members to each other, reducing rejection, and increasing acceptance."¹

¹Report of the American Psychological Association Task Force on Appropriate Therapeutic Responses to Sexual Orientation, [American Psychological Association](#)

²Ilan Meyer, Prejudice, Social stress, and mental health in lesbian, gay, and bisexual populations: Conceptual issues and research evidence, [Psychological Bulletin](#)

Three Reasons to Say NO to Conversion Therapy

1. Conversion Therapy is Harmful & Damaging

The American Association of Pediatrics states that LGBTQ+ people suffer from the homophobia and transphobia inherent in conversion therapy. This marginalization negatively affects health, mental health, and educational experiences. Other negative impacts of conversion therapy include depression, thoughts and attempts of suicide, substance abuse, social anxiety, altered body image, and other mental health issues.³

The Pan-American regional office of the World Health Organization asserts that conversion therapy “represent a severe threat to the health and human rights of the affected persons. They constitute unjustifiable practices that should be denounced and subject to adequate sanctions and penalties.”⁴

The National Association of Social Workers states that conversion therapy can lead to “severe emotional damage”.⁵

The American School Counselors Association knows that “it is not the school counselor’s role to attempt to change a student’s sexual orientation or gender identity. School counselors recognize the profound harm intrinsic to therapies alleging to change an individual’s sexual orientation or gender identity and advocate to protect LGBTQ+ students from this harm.”⁶

Testimony from survivors of conversion therapy:

“My weekly sessions with [my counselor] set me on a devastating, decade-long course of self-destruction, as each session made me sink deeper into depression and drove me to the brink of suicide. Eventually, I realized that the only way for me to escape the psychological abuse was to leave home.” - Ryan Kendall, survivor, who recently graduated from Columbia University summa cum laude⁷

“When psychological abuse was not sufficient to change my sexual orientation, my therapist moved to what can only be called physical abuse.” – Sam Brinton, survivor, graduated from Massachusetts Institute of Technology with dual master’s degrees in nuclear engineering, and technology and policy.⁷

“Little did anyone know that the visit with the [conversion] therapist would start a seven-year battle that would pit my wellbeing against the therapist’s relentless attempts to change my sexual orientation, and cause me to sink so deep into confusion and depression that I couldn’t leave my house for days on end, and even considered taking my own life.” - Mathew Shurka resides in New York City, where he’s a student at Baruch College, and plans on becoming an architect.⁷

“As survivors of conversion therapy, each of us has experienced harm from these practices. To prevent increased victimization and to empower ourselves in our recovery process, we join together in calling for a ban on conversion therapy.” – Part of a joint statement from more than 100 survivors, friends, families and allies.⁸

³ Sandra G. Hassink, MD, president of the American Academy of Pediatrics, [Support Letter](#)

⁴ Pan American Health Organization (regional office for the Americas, World Health Organization), [“Therapies” to Change Sexual Orientation Lack Medical Justification and Threaten Health](#)

⁵ National Association of Social Workers, “Reparative” and “Conversion” Therapies for Lesbian and Gay Men, [Position Statement](#)

⁶ American School Counselors Association, [ASCA Position Statements](#)

⁷ National Center for Lesbian Rights, [Survivor Stories](#)

⁸ To read the entire statement and learn more about their stories, visit the [statement web page](#).

2. Conversion Therapy Does NOT Work

Many scholars have criticized the research that supports conversion therapy on the basis of the methodological and conceptual flaws.⁹

Judith Glassgold, the chair of the task force that produced the Report of the American Psychological Association Task Force on Appropriate Therapeutic Responses to Sexual Orientation, said there is no scientific evidence that conversion therapy works. In fact, it runs the risk of making patients anxious, depressed, and at times suicidal. "It provided false hope, which can be devastating," Glassgold said. "It harmed self-esteem and self-regard."¹⁰

The following is a list of organizations who oppose conversion therapy because it is ineffective and harmful¹¹:

The American Academy of Child Adolescent
Psychiatry

American Academy of Pediatrics

American Association for Marriage and Family
Therapy

American Association of School Administrators

American College of Physicians

American Counseling Association

American Federation of Teachers

American Medical Association

American Psychiatric Association

American Psychoanalytic Association

American Psychological Association

American School Counselors Association

American School Health Association

Interfaith Alliance Foundation

National Association of School Psychologists

National Association of Secondary School
Principals

National Association of Social Workers

National Education Association

Pan American Health Organization: Regional

Office of the World Health Organization

Just the Facts Coalition

School Social Work Association of America

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services
Administration

World Psychiatric Association

Former supporter of conversion therapy had this to say about the practice:

"...the simple fact is that there is no way to determine if the participants' accounts of change were valid. I believe I owe the gay community an apology for my study making unproven claims of the efficacy of reparative therapy. I also apologize to any gay person who wasted time and energy undergoing some form of reparative therapy because they believed that I had proven that reparative therapy works..." – Robert Spitzer, former researcher of conversion therapy¹²

⁹Morrow & Beckstead, Conversion Therapies for Same-Sex Attracted Clients in Religious Conflict: Context, Predisposing Factors, Experiences, and Implications for Therapy, [The Counseling Psychologist](#)

¹⁰ Gabriel Arana, [My So-Called-Ex-Gay-Life](#)

¹¹ Human Rights Campaign, [Policy and Position Statements on Conversion Therapy](#)

¹²Robert Spitzer, [Letter to Kenneth Zucker, editor of the Archives of Sexual Behavior](#)

3. There is Nothing Wrong with Being LGBTQ+

The American Psychological Association affirms that any sexual or romantic attractions, feelings, and behaviors are “positive variations of human sexuality.” The APA **opposes** portrayals of LGBTQ+ youth and adults as mentally ill due to their orientation.¹ There is no reason to convert LGBTQ+ individuals, since their LGBTQ+ identity is not an illness.¹³

However, LGBTQ+ people (like all people) do need support. At Side by Side, we provide welcoming and affirming youth support groups. Youth who attend Side by Side support groups can identify positive coping strategies. In our middle school support group, 85% of youth reported increased feelings of self-worth and self-esteem. 80% of youth reported an increase in healthy peer relationships after attending the program.

It is important for any person who is experiencing pain to get the help that they need. For some people, this may be meeting with a clinician. The APA advises parents and kids to only “seek psychotherapy, social support, and educational services that provide accurate information on sexual orientation and sexuality, increase family and school support, and reduce rejection of sexual minority youth.”¹ Conversion therapy does none of these things, but there are clinicians who do.

In 2015, Side by Side began offering free mental health services to our youth with a skilled clinician. We regularly connect with local health providers who have specialized expertise, and are affirming to LGBTQ+ youth. If you are in need of affirming mental health services, please reach out to Side by Side at [804-644-4800](tel:8046444800) or info@sidebysideva.org and we will refer you to an appropriate resource.

Websites of Embedded Links

1. Report of the American Psychological Association Task Force on Appropriate Therapeutic Responses to Sexual Orientation, American Psychological Association <https://www.apa.org/pi/lgbt/resources/therapeutic-response.pdf>
2. Ilan Meyer, Prejudice, Social stress, and mental health in lesbian, gay, and bisexual populations: Conceptual issues and research evidence, Psychological Bulletin <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/0033-2909.129.5.674>
3. Sandra G. Hassink, MD, president of the American Academy of Pediatrics, Support Letter <https://lieu.house.gov/sites/lieu.house.gov/files/documents/AAP%20support%20letter%20conversion%20therapy%20ban.pdf>
4. Pan American Health Organization (regional office for the Americas, World Health Organization), “Therapies” to Change Sexual Orientation Lack Medical Justification and Threaten Health http://www.paho.org/hq/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=6803&Itemid=1926
5. National Association of Social Workers, “Reparative” and “Conversion” Therapies for Lesbian and Gay Men, Position Statement <http://www.naswdc.org/diversity/lgb/reparative.asp>
6. American School Counselors Association, ASCA Position Statements <https://www.schoolcounselor.org/asca/media/asca/PositionStatements/PositionStatements.pdf>
7. National Center for Lesbian Rights, Survivor Stories <http://www.nclrights.org/bornperfect-survivor-stories-and-survivor-network/>
8. To read the entire statement and learn more about their stories, visit the Survivors Statements web page. <http://conversiontherapysurvivors.org/survivors-statement>
9. Morrow & Beckstead, Conversion Therapies for Same-Sex Attracted Clients in Religious Conflict: Context, Predisposing Factors, Experiences, and Implications for Therapy, The Counseling Psychologist <http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0011000004268877>
10. Gabriel Arana, My So-Called-Ex-Gay-Life <http://prospect.org/article/my-so-called-ex-gay-life>
11. Human Rights Campaign, Policy and Position Statements on Conversion Therapy <http://www.hrc.org/resources/policy-and-position-statements-on-conversion-therapy>
12. Darlene Bogle, Michael Bussee, and Jeremy Marks, Apology From Ex-Gay Leaders <https://beyondexgay.com/article/apology.html>
13. Robert Spitzer, Letter to Kenneth Zucker, editor of the Archives of Sexual Behavior <https://www.truthwinsout.org/news/2012/04/24542/>
14. Gonsiorek, J. C, The empirical basis for the demise of the illness model of homosexuality, Homosexuality: Research implications for public policy <https://us.sagepub.com/en-us/nam/homosexuality/book3006>

¹³ Gonsiorek, J. C, The empirical basis for the demise of the illness model of homosexuality, [Homosexuality: Research implications for public policy](https://us.sagepub.com/en-us/nam/homosexuality/book3006)