

# CREATING SAFE(r) SPACES

## Starting with your physical space...

- ✓ Have gender-neutral or “all gender” washrooms
- ✓ Hang a safe space sign in a visible location
- ✓ Have an inviting office
  - Does your bookshelf have LGBTQ-related books?
  - Are there resources in the waiting area that are LGBTQ-friendly? What about LGBTQ newspapers and magazines?
  - If applicable, is there mention of LGBTQ treatment competence on your website?

## Moving to your forms...

- ✓ Instead of having two options in the gender category, consider just leaving a blank, or not including this question at all (therefore not forcing someone to out themselves)
- ✓ Consider having space for preferred name. Always use preferred name in therapy. Ask what name they would like used for receipts
- ✓ Instead of single/married/divorced – include more options or don't include this question

## In the session...

- ✓ Don't assume gender or gender pronouns
- ✓ Use inclusive and respectful language (e.g. using the term partner rather than specific terms like spouse, wife, husband, boyfriend, or girlfriend in general situations and using specific terms to honor personal choices when directed to do so by the individual). Asking “are you in a relationship at the moment?” or “Who are the important people in your life?”
- ✓ Pay careful attention to the language the client uses, and follow their lead – they may adapt a range of terms and labels to describe themselves, their lives, and their identities (partner/bf/gf/spouse).
- ✓ Don't pathologize the client. Instead, use affirmative counseling techniques that offer clients a safe, positive place.
- ✓ Help clients understand that mental health concerns stem from discrimination and negative social attitudes, rather than some “fault” or badness of their own making. This is part of a feminist approach – recognizing that problems there are real barriers we must acknowledge. This alone is huge, and probably the biggest thing I do for my clients, as it helps remind them that there is nothing wrong with them. We can help the client explore the social causes of their experience (eg., when people face victim blaming after an assault).
  - “Trauma is not what happens to us, but what we hold inside us in the absence of an empathetic witness” -Peter Levine in In an Unspoken Voice
- ✓ We also need to move away from the idea of a neutral, unbiased therapist. We **should** have an opinion about oppression and explicitly state it: (eg., “what happened to you wasn't okay. It shouldn't be like this.”)



## With a Group....

- ✓ Communicate and create a non-judgmental, LGBTQ-affirming environment when conducting group screening.
- ✓ In gender-specific groups (e.g., inpatient treatment settings, substance abuse treatment, etc.), counselors should support transgender individuals attending the gender group with which they identify with rather than, for instance, insisting that a transgender person attends a group setting according to the sex that person was assigned at birth.
- ✓ Collaborate with group members in establishing group rules. For example, a group rule that members do not socialize outside of group may be limiting or impossible for LGBTQ individuals given the close-knit nature of LGBTQ communities.
- ✓ Object to and eliminate jokes and humor that put down or portray LGBTQ people in stereotypical ways.

## Outside the session....

- ✓ Continue to seek awareness, knowledge, and skills with attending to LGBTQ issues in counseling. Continued education in this area is a necessity for competent counseling due to the rapid development of research and growing knowledge base related to LGBTQ experience, community, and life within our diverse, heterocentric, and ever-changing society. This can be done through books, films, visiting LGBTQ specific places like The Landing, ISMSS, Pride Centre, & attending Pride Festivals.
- ✓ Refrain from referring all LGBTQ issues to LGBTQ staff - they may not have any expertise in LGBTQ issues and/or their expertise may not be limited to LGBTQ issues. Instead, promote an atmosphere where all individuals are encouraged to know about LGBTQ identities.
- ✓ Come out as an ally.

## Remember....

- ✓ To be an effective counselor with LGBTQ clients, it is not important that we identify as LGBTQ or be experts in the field: simply, being respectful, open and curious can create a strong therapeutic relationship and go a long way.
- ✓ Most LGBTQ individuals actually do not seek services specifically related to their sexual orientation. Acknowledge that sexual orientation, gender identity, and other intersecting identities (race, ethnicity, class, ability, age, etc.) may or may not be the presenting concern for LGBTQ individuals, but that experiences of oppression may impact presenting issues.
- ✓ Even when clients DO want to talk about sexuality/gender, this can vary widely. So for example the goals of a \*trans individual wanting to talk about "transitioning" – they may want to transition socially (pronouns), or take hormones, or undergo surgery (and there are many surgery options).
- ✓ Keep in mind that "coming out" is not a one-time event, and does not necessarily mean informing all people in their lives about sexuality/gender. (It may not be advisable/possible -> eg., a client who fears coming out to family due to their religious beliefs).
- ✓ Understand how stigma and pressures to be gender conforming may affect a client even in the face of the resiliency and strengths. Further, understand how these factors influence decision making in regards to employment, housing, & health care.

