

Things to Consider When Your LGBTQ+ Clients Plan to Attend Family Gatherings

Holidays, weddings, funerals and other family gatherings can be challenging times for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer or Questioning (LGBTQ+) clients. It is a time when your clients may traditionally get together and engage in family and religious rituals. For LGBTQ+ people whose families are not affirming, it may mean making a choice between being with their family of origin, being with a family of choice (friends and loved ones), or being alone. Here are some tips to help you to prepare your LGBTQ+ clients navigate family gatherings:

Sadly, for many LGBTQ+ individuals who come from families that are rejecting there are very real behavioral health consequences. From the ground-breaking work of the Family Acceptance Project we know that youth that come from highly rejecting families are at:

- 6 x increased risk of depression
- 5.5 x increased risk for suicidal ideation
- 8 x increased risk for suicide attempts
- 3 x increased use of illegal drugs
- 3 x increased risk of HIV/STD

There is every reason to believe that family rejection is harmful to LGBTQ+ people of all ages. For example, older LGBTQ+ individuals are at risk for increased social isolation due to discrimination and rejection. Additionally, LGBTQ+ elders may also be navigating the loss of their support group as their friends age, become less mobile, or pass away. This group of LGBTQ+ people is less likely to have children who can care for them as they age. These circumstances may result in the connections they have to their biological family becoming even more pronounced. All these stressors can become especially challenging during holidays and family gatherings.

Rejecting behaviors are actions that reject the person's identity. Here are some examples:

- 1 Refusing to acknowledge the person your client is dating.
- 2 Refusing to use the correct name and pronoun.
- 3 Trying to change the person's sexual orientation or gender identity through prayer, counseling, or by getting them to date someone of the opposite gender.
- 4 Asking your client to hide their identity or dress in a way that is uncomfortable to them.
- 5 Not including your client in family events or traditions.

How to help

- Before they go to family events, ask your LGBTQ+ client if their family is a source of support and affirmation. If not, support them considering their options and making a "family gathering self-care plan."
- In supporting your LGBTQ+ client's plans for attending a family gathering, ask them:

- What they hope to occur
- What are they anticipating will occur
- What they are willing to ignore
- What they will not stand for

This may be the first time someone has suggested they can make expectations of acceptance and affirmation from their families.

- If their family intends to participate in traditions, religious ceremonies, or visits with non-affirming people that the client wishes to avoid, explore with your client whether it is appropriate for them to let their family know that they may want to skip that part of the family ritual. Practice those conversations with your client so they develop strategies to approach these conversations.
- Help your client develop a plan for how non-supportive behavior will be addressed. For example, if someone uses the wrong name or pronoun, do they want a supportive family member to jump in with a correction? Or would they prefer to be in control of deciding and how to correct others? It might be helpful for you to role-play that correction with your client so they know how to address it if it comes up. How will they address behavior that is not supportive? Here again, role playing with you can help your client to be most prepared prior to their visit with family and set it up for success.
- Suggest that your client have a supportive person ready by text or phone to talk to or consider setting up a telehealth visit during their stay with their family. Visits with family tend to bring up a lot of feelings that can be harnessed for therapeutic growth while also deepening your client's sense of support from you.
- Help develop a self-care plan with your client for during and after the event. This could be planning a fun or relaxing activity after the family event that will give them something extra to look forward to. It could also be something simple, like making sure they ensure some alone time to regroup during their visit (e.g., morning or evening walks alone).
- If deciding not to attend a family gathering is the plan, that is okay too! How would your client prefer to spend their time? Normalizing boundary setting and developing their own affirming rituals is important.
- For clients who may not have a family or support system, but would like to build community, explore affirming social events and support groups that can help your client connect and celebrate with others.

Sharing the plan with their family or support system

Your client's family may be as anxious as your client is about the upcoming family gathering. This is especially true if your client has recently come out, has started dressing differently, is going by a different name, or announced they have a partner. By developing and sharing ground rules for the visit, your client is helping everyone to know what to expect and how to be affirming. Many families want to be supportive and sometimes need help knowing what that looks like. So it is important that your client be as clear as possible about what they need. As a provider, you can help them process and think through their expectations, plan, and self-care strategies.

