

# SUPPORTING FAMILY MEMBERS OF LGBTQ+ PEOPLE

As mental health providers, you may talk to family members in distress, or who describe family conflict related to their loved one's <sup>1</sup>LGBTQ+ identity. It is important that you know how to effectively support families through these challenging discussions. The goal should be to meet family members "where they are" with their own experiences, worries, and questions while simultaneously modeling an affirmative stance toward LGBTQ+ identities. Research has shown that when families support and affirm their LGBTQ+ loved ones, it reduces anxiety, depression, suicidal ideation, harmful substance use, and other negative life and health outcomes for the LGBTQ+ person (Ryan, 2009). It is imperative that we provide non-judgmental spaces for families to seek support while also offering them resources that will improve their abilities to affirm their LGBTQ+ family member.

Here are some helpful tips to keep in mind as you work with family members:

## 01 Be an active and empathetic listener

Support family members to express their thoughts, concerns, and questions without interruption. This can affirm that they are heard and understood around a topic that is likely very new to them.



## 02 Build rapport with the family member

Often, family members are processing how to reconcile their love for their LGBTQ+ family member with things they have learned through media, their faith community, or cultural teachings. Some of the information they have learned may be rooted in myths, misinformation, and bias. It is important to build rapport and trust before engaging in any psychoeducation or myth busting in order to create a sense of safety.

## 03 Use a stance of curiosity and unconditional positive regard as you explore thoughts and beliefs

Ask the family what they know about LGBTQ+ people and where they learned the information from. Many people learn inaccurate stereotypes early in life from the media or broader community. Sometimes asking this question can lead to an acknowledgment that some information they learned can be inaccurate. You may even be able to encourage opportunities for them to consider how their early learning about LGBTQ+ identities may have shaped their misconceptions about LGBTQ+ people.



## 04 Model affirmation in your own interactions and language

This could be as simple as modeling appropriate ways to use certain pronouns, avoiding assumptions about family structure and identity, and using gender neutral language. If the family is practicing affirming language, offer to do a role play where they are the LGBTQ+ person and you are their family member. This may also foster an opportunity for them to experience empathy towards their loved one.

## 05 Listen for cues that they are open to new information

They may say something like, "I don't even know what that is," or, "I am not sure what I am supposed to do." When you hear these cues, ask them if they are open to learning more and connect them to relevant resources and education, such as books, videos, or LGBTQ+ focused programs.







## 06 Explore whether the family member would be interested in connecting to peers

Share information about how helpful it can be to connect with others navigating similar concerns, uncertainties, and complex emotions. There are several support groups led by families that have gone through similar journeys. [PFLAG](#), [Strong Family Alliance](#), and [TransParent](#) are good options to start with.

## 07 Foster hope for the future. Be person-centered, ask the family member what kind of life they hope for their LGBTQ+ family member

If they mention things like “health” or “happiness,” you can connect those goals to what we know about the importance of family affirmation for increased health and positive life outcomes. If they say something like, “I wanted to be a grandma and now that won’t happen,” you can use that statement as an opportunity to talk about the advances in family building and that they, in fact, can still be hopeful about becoming a grandparent.



## 08 Encourage the family member to find common ground between their faith beliefs and an LGBTQ+ supportive stance

You might ask them, “Are there tenets of your faith that would allow you to continue to show love and kindness to your LGBTQ+ sister?” You can also share resources with them on LGBTQ+ affirming faith communities in their belief system that they can contact for further support. Remind the family member that they can still practice their faith, culture, and traditions while also showing love and support to their LGBTQ+ loved one.



## 09 Encourage family members to continue to show love and affection to their LGBTQ+ family member, even if they are conflicted

If family members continue to show love to the LGBTQ+ person, it will result in better outcomes for them. Expressing our love can be a very culturally influenced behavior, so it would be wise to ask the family member, “How do you currently show love to your family?” Here are a few examples:

- Continue to show love and care to their LGBTQ+ family member.
- Tell the person they love them.
- Include them in family activities and rituals.
- Inquire about their relationships and show genuine interest in learning more about what they are sharing with you.
- Ask the LGBTQ+ person for time to learn more about the topic.



## 10 Remind family members, that the LGBTQ+ person does not need to know they are conflicted

It is very important that family members avoid speaking negatively about their conflicting beliefs in front of the LGBTQ+ person. Instead, encourage family members to find safe places to explore their conflicting thoughts and feelings away from their LGBTQ+ loved one. This is critical if the LGBTQ+ person is a child, youth or young adult. It is especially important if the LGBTQ+ person is experiencing depression or anxiety.







## 11 Be sure to provide resources and support to the LGBTQ+ individual as well

You may not have contact with the LGBTQ+ person, but if and when you do, it is important to find ways to support them as their family members navigate their own journeys toward acceptance. It can be challenging for an LGBTQ+ person to wait for an important family member to start supporting and affirming them. It is recommended that the LGBTQ+ person also be connected to affirming clinical care, support groups, peer support and other helpful resources.

Remember that every family's situation is unique, and progress may take time, but families deserve the support and space to work through decades of bad information they have received about LGBTQ+ populations, and LGBTQ+ people deserve to have strong relationships with their families. We must include working with families as a priority in our work to end negative health disparities among LGBTQ+ populations.

Here are a few great resources that can help in your work with families of LGBTQ+ people:

1. [Supporting LGBTQ+ Youth Starts at Home](#) is an animated short which is focused on family acceptance of youth with diverse sexual orientation, gender identity, and expression (SOGIE). This animated short focuses on the impact of rejection children, youth and young adults can experience in their homes and communities and provides examples and strategies to promote support, acceptance, and affirmation of youth with diverse SOGIE.
2. This website on [Family Acceptance](#) offers lists of culturally and faith-specific resources.
3. [Gaychurch.org](#) keeps a database of affirming Christian churches that can be searched by zip code.
4. [Trans Family Support Services](#) has a lot of support groups for LGBTQ+ youth and for caregivers.
5. [Freedhearts.org](#) has online discussion and support groups for religious families coming to terms with their child's gender identity and/or sexual orientation.
6. [PFLAG](#) is a support group network that has chapters across the country. The group stands for Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays and is a group for parents ran by other parents who have gone through similar processes. No matter the stage a family/caregiver is in, PFLAG is a good resource to which to refer them. They also offer resources for families that practice [Judaism](#) as well as [Islam](#).
7. [Gender Spectrum](#) provides trans-specific resources for caregivers including a [Gender Support Plan & Gender Communication Plan](#).
8. [Family Acceptance Project Educational Pamphlets](#) (offered in several languages) describe the impact that family rejection and acceptance can have on children and youth and provide ways to help. There is a donation request when you enter the page, but a donation is not required to access these resources.
9. [Family Acceptance Project Posters](#) (offered in several languages) detail the behaviors that can harm youth and the behaviors that can lead to positive health and wellbeing. *There is a donation request when you enter the page, but a donation is not required to access these resources.*
10. [Youth Acceptance Project](#) is a clinical model that works with families of LGBTQ+ youth to address their fears and worries related to their LGBTQ+ child and support the family as they learn new and affirming behaviors to improve their youth's well-being.
11. [AFFIRM Caregiver](#) is an evidence-informed, seven session manualized intervention to enhance affirmative parenting practices that promote the safety and well-being of LGBTQ+ youth. The AFFIRM Caregiver model emerged from AFFIRM Youth, an evidence-based affirmative Cognitive Behavior Therapy intervention which has been scientifically shown to reduce psychosocial distress and improve coping skills among LGBTQ+ youth (Austin, Craig, & D'Souza, 2017; Craig & Austin, 2016).
12. Families can find family support at one of the many [National Federation of Families](#) in their state.

<sup>1</sup> LGBTQ+ stands for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, questioning, and the "+" stands for the diverse sexual orientations, gender identities, and expressions (SOGIE) not represented explicitly in the acronym.

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