

# Pastoral Care and LGBT Seniors

A resource from the Center  
for Lesbian and Gay Studies  
in Religion and Ministry  
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Thank you for your interest in working with LGBT seniors. We hope this can be a resource for you as you provide pastoral care to this very important population which values and needs your support. LGBT older adults have specific pastoral care needs based on their unique life experiences. You can offer quality pastoral care for these seniors by being aware of these cultural differences.

A recent study by SAGE (Services & Advocacy for Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual & Transgendered Elders) stated that population of those 65 and older in the United States is already 20% larger than the entire population of Canada. It is expected to double in the next 30 years from 40.2 million to 80 million. Further, they estimate that the LGBT population of those 65 and older number 1.5 million and will grow to nearly 3 million by 2030<sup>1</sup>.

Many LGBT seniors came of age during a time when homosexuality was seen as a psychiatric disorder by the general public or worse. At an extreme, some were forced to endure electroshock therapy, conversion therapy (also known as ex-gay ministry), or even exorcism. The stressors of aging faced by many seniors are compounded by the trauma inflicted by religion and society around their sexual and gender identities. In addition to dealing with issues of grief around loss of self, transition, and independence, many of these elders are also dealing with deep rooted trauma around rejection from friends, family, and church because of their sexuality. You can make a difference by providing affirming, compassionate pastoral care.

People age in the context of a social network composed of family, friends, and the wider cultural backdrop. Each element of the social context can have an impact on the way the elder understands and makes sense of what is happening in their lives. As members of a minority, LGBT seniors face unique circumstances with regards to these social networks.

## Spirituality and LGBT Seniors

**“Spirituality:** That which lies at the core of each person’s being, an essential dimension which brings meaning to life. Constituted not only by religious practices, but understood more broadly, as relationship with God, however God or ultimate meaning is perceived by the person, and in relationship with other people.”<sup>2</sup> —Elizabeth MacKinlay

Spirituality encompasses not only the presence of Spirit, it also includes our relationships with other people; therefore, we cannot ignore the importance of helping LGBT elders foster con-

nections with others in our communities, and with the Divine. By educating ourselves on the issues faced by LGBT seniors, we can help to bring them into the fold of a loving community that honors their wisdom, experience, and identity. While caring for their spirits, we can also see the reflection of the Divine in their resilience and knowledge. After all, LGBT elders have survived and sustained a great deal.

Keep in mind that because many of these elders have been hurt deeply by religion in the past, they may have strong initial suspicions of your motives or work. It is the responsibility of clergy to convey a non-judgmental presence during visits, making sure to affirm seniors as they are and assure them that they are safe. Ways to convey this include:

- Maintain an affirming facial expression. Elders may open up to clergy after trust has been established and share information that they may not have shared with others. The job of clergy is not to judge but to encourage sharing.
- Do not make assumptions about the gender of the elder or of their partner.
- Avoid “fixing.” Empathetic listening is your most helpful tool. Be willing to listen to painful stories of religious wounding without defensiveness.
- Show that you are open to conversations about sexuality and gender by wearing a rainbow lapel pin or some other marker that indicates your acceptance.
- Discuss positive ways to integrate sexuality, spirituality, and gender and offer affirming and inclusive readings of the Bible or other spiritual traditions.

## **Vulnerabilities of LGBT Seniors**

Because of social stigma and prejudice, many LGBT seniors have been estranged from their biological families and have had to develop resilient coping strategies for finding support, such as creating “families of choice.” LGBT seniors are more likely to be single and/or childless, relying often on friends and community members for support. Some LGBT seniors choose to not “be out” in residential facilities for fear of prejudice or abuse. Because of these factors, LGBT seniors often find themselves isolated. Homophobia and transphobia, which may be compounded by racism and other forms of oppression, make LGBT seniors particularly vulnerable.

Access to support around healthy and successful aging can be challenging. As a spiritual caregiver, you may be called on to be especially mindful of the ways that LGBT seniors are particularly susceptible to abuse because they are often on their own and vulnerable.<sup>3</sup> These include:

### **Physical Abuse**

Physical elder abuse is non-accidental use of force against an elderly person that results in physical pain, injury, or impairment. Such abuse includes not only physical assaults such as hitting or shoving but the inappropriate use of drugs, restraints, or confinement. Homophobia, transphobia, sexism, and racism from facility staff can be contributing factors to this kind of abuse.

### **Financial Abuse**

This involves the unauthorized use of an elderly person’s funds or property, either by a caregiver or an outside scam artist. Unscrupulous actions might include misuse of an elder’s bank accounts, theft of goods from their home, identity theft, forgery of the elder’s signature, or announcements of a “prize” the elder has won but must pay money to claim.



## **Emotional Abuse**

In emotional or psychological abuse, people speak to or treat elderly persons in ways that cause emotional pain or distress. These may include intimidation through yelling or threats, humiliation, ignoring or isolating, or habitual blaming.<sup>4</sup> Again, homophobia and transphobia are major factors in this type of abuse, which can be compounded by racism.

## **Sexual Abuse**

Elders can be subjected to sexual harassment or abuse. Sometimes homophobia is expressed through sexual jokes or stereotypes directed at LGBT seniors. Transgender seniors may be targeted with inappropriate curiosity about their bodies.

## **Segregation**

Partnered residents may be separated from their same-sex partners. This may be due to homophobia in residential facilities. Access to partners can be made difficult or those labeled as LGBT may be kept separate from other residents, increasing their isolation.

## **Transphobia**

According to the National Transgender Discrimination Survey 61% of respondents reported having medically transitioned, while only 33% said they had surgically transitioned.<sup>5</sup> Despite this, transgendered residents may be misgendered and assigned to an area based on their genitalia and not on how they identify or have lived their lives.

Abuse of the types described above is sadly not uncommon but the presence of regular visitors can play a vital role in preventing or curbing these abuses. As part of your pastoral responsibilities, if you suspect that someone you are visiting is being abused, it is your duty to report it to the Adult Protective Services office in your county. Below are resources for neighboring counties:

Alameda County 24 Hour Abuse Hotline - (866) 225-5277

Contra Costa County 24 Hour Abuse Hotline - (877) 839-4347

San Francisco County 24 Hour Abuse Hotline - (800) 814-0009

## **Additional Resources**

It is our hope that you find this resource helpful as you engage LGBT seniors in your community. Below you will find additional resources from organizations that specialize in the needs of LGBT seniors. Finally, please feel free to use us as a resource as well. We are happy to partner with you as you engage with LGBT issues in your ministry.

### **National Organizations**

- Services for Advocacy for Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender Elders (SAGE): [www.sageusa.org](http://www.sageusa.org)
- Aging As Ourselves: [www.agingasourselves.org](http://www.agingasourselves.org)
- GRIOT Circle: [www.griotcircle.org](http://www.griotcircle.org)
- Transgender Aging Network : [www.forge-forward.org/TAN](http://www.forge-forward.org/TAN)
- AARP: <http://www.aarp.org/relationships/friends-family/aarp-pride.html>
- The American Society on Aging LGBT Aging Issues Network: <http://www.asaging.org/lain>
- National Resource Center for LGBT: <http://www.lgbtagingcenter.org>

## Local Organizations

- Bay Area Legal Aid (GLBT Seniors Advocacy Project): <http://baylegal.org/what-we-do/glbtseniors-advocacy-project>
- Lavender Seniors of the East Bay: <http://www.lavenderseniors.org>
- Open House (Housing, Community, and Services for LGBT Seniors): <http://openhouse-sf.org>
- Rainbow Community Center: <http://rainbowcc.org>
- Transgender Law Center: <http://transgenderlawcenter.org>
- Pacific Center for Human Growth: <http://pacificcenter.org>

## References

- <sup>1</sup> *Improving the Lives of LGBT Older Adults*, Services & Advocacy for Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual & Transgendered Elders in collaboration with Movement Advancement Project, March 2010.
- <sup>2</sup> Elizabeth MacKinlay, "Spiritual Care: Recognizing Spiritual Needs of Older Adults," *Journal of Religion, Spirituality & Aging*, Volume 18, Issue 2-3, 2006.
- <sup>3</sup> *Improving the Lives of LGBT Older Adults*, Services & Advocacy for Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual & Transgendered Elders in collaboration with Movement Advancement Project, March 2010
- <sup>4</sup> [http://www.helpguide.org/mental/elder\\_abuse\\_physical\\_emotional\\_sexual\\_neglect.htm](http://www.helpguide.org/mental/elder_abuse_physical_emotional_sexual_neglect.htm)
- <sup>5</sup> *Injustice at Every Turn, A Report of the National Transgender Discrimination Survey*, National Center for Transgender Equality, 2011.



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Our Mission: To advance the well-being of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered people and to transform faith communities and the wider society by taking a leading role in shaping a new public discourse on religion and sexuality through education, research, community building and advocacy.