

## How to Talk About Sexual Orientation Change Efforts in Social Work Education

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This document was designed to help social work educators talk about issues related to sexual orientation change efforts (SOCE), commonly referred to as conversion/reparative therapy. For in-depth discussion of these topics, please refer to the accompanying document, [Bibliography on Issues Related to Sexual Orientation Change Efforts](#).

### What are sexual orientation change efforts?

According to the National Association of Social Workers (2015): “the term *sexual orientation change efforts* (or SOCE) include any practice seeking to change a person’s sexual orientation, including, but not limited to, efforts to change behaviors, gender identity, or gender expressions, or to reduce or eliminate sexual or romantic attractions or feelings toward a person of the same gender.”

For more information: National Association of Social Workers. (2015). *Sexual orientation change efforts (SOCE) and conversion therapy with lesbians, gay men, bisexuals, and transgender persons*. Retrieved from <https://www.socialworkers.org/LinkClick.aspx?fileticket=yH3UsGQQmYI%3d&portalid=0>

### What terms do I need to understand when talking about sexual orientation change efforts?

Definitions are available at: National Association of Social Workers (2015). *Sexual orientation change efforts (SOCE) and conversion therapy with lesbians, gay men, bisexuals, and transgender persons*. Retrieved from <https://www.socialworkers.org/LinkClick.aspx?fileticket=yH3UsGQQmYI%3d&portalid=0>

### What are some of the modalities that are sometimes used to “change” a person’s sexual orientation or gender identity?

Historically, SOCE encompassed a range of approaches, all based on a pathologizing view of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or questioning (LGBTQ) identities. Therapies to change sexual orientation or gender identity have included pharmacological methods (medication), surgical interventions, and

behavioral (cognitive) and psychoanalytic therapies intended to change sexual orientation (APA, 2009). Aversive therapeutic techniques such as delivering electric shocks during arousal to same-sex scenarios (electroshock therapy), requiring clients to perform acts that cause shame in front of groups (shame aversion), and applying covert sensitization (using imagery to imagine negative consequences associated with LGBTQ feelings or behavior) were also used (APA, 2009). In recent years, educational techniques such as teaching heterosexual dating skills have also been more frequently utilized in SOCE efforts (APA, 2009).

### **Why should social work students be educated about conversion therapy?**

1. Conversion therapy is harmful:
  - These therapies have been shown to contribute to psychological harm to LGBTQ people and their families (APA, 2009).
2. Conversion therapy is opposed by national organizations:
  - Conversion therapy is opposed by a number of professional and educational organizations, including the Council on Social Work Education, National Association of Social Workers, American Psychological Association, American Counseling Association, and the Association for Marriage and Family Therapy (AAMFT, 2009; ACA, 2013; APA, 2009; CSWE, 2016; NASW, 2000, 2015).
  - The American Association of Christian Counselors (2014) eliminated the promotion of conversion therapy in its revised 2014 Code of Ethics.
3. Conversion therapies are incompatible with the Educational Policy of the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) on which its Accreditation Standards are based:
  - These therapies violate the Educational Policy on which the Accreditation Standards are based, since they do not promote social justice or respect for diversity and difference (CSWE, 2015, 2016).
4. Conversion therapy is based on the results of misleading studies:
  - For example, in 2012 Robert Spitzer formally retracted his 2001 study that claimed gay men and women could switch their sexual orientation (Anastas, 2013).
5. Conversion therapy is against the law in several states:
  - In April 2015, President Obama denounced the use of conversion therapies and strongly encouraged the enactment of state laws that ban the use of conversion therapies for minors (Jarrett, 2015).
  - Practicing conversion therapy with minors is banned in a number of states, including California; New Jersey; New York; and Washington,

DC. Such legislation states that claims of changing sexual orientation or gender identity via reparative therapy are fraudulent.

6. Conversion therapy is a violation of best practice:
  - Teaching and practice of conversion therapy is considered a violation of best practice in social work (NASW, 2015).
7. A key organization that promoted conversion therapy recently closed:
  - Exodus International, the “oldest and largest Christian ministry dealing with faith and homosexuality,” announced in 2013 that the organization would close its doors after 37 years. In an open letter to the LGBT community, the president of Exodus International apologized for “the pain and hurt” experienced by many individuals and also for the promotion of “sexual orientation change efforts and reparative theories about sexual orientation that stigmatized parents” (Payne, 2013).
8. Government agencies have taken a stand against conversion therapy:
  - The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) published its report, *Ending conversion therapy: Supporting and affirming LGBTQ youth* (2015). The report was designed to provide mental health professionals as well as children and families with accurate information about effective and ineffective therapeutic practices related to sexual orientation and gender identity.

**What should I do if one of my clients wants to change his/her sexual orientation or gender identity?**

- Clients may exhibit distress about their gender or sexual identity and state a desire to change these identities. Social workers recognize that LGBTQ individuals continue to experience stigma, discrimination, and violence in contemporary society, which may contribute to client fears about identifying as LGBTQ. To minimize such distress, practitioners should use affirmative approaches and seek to gently explore those fears while providing education about LGBTQ experiences (Anastas, 2013).
- Affirmative care asserts that LGBTQ identities are a normal variant of development, and validates those identities, while recognizing the impact of discrimination such as homophobia and transphobia on the lives of LGBTQ individuals (Craig, Austin, & Alessi, 2013).
- An American Psychological Association (2009) task force found that “client-centered, multicultural, evidence-based approaches that provide (a) acceptance and support (b) assessment, (c) active coping to manage “discrimination and stress, (d) developing social support, and (e) identity exploration and development” are the most effective approaches to working with clients desiring such changes (p. 4). Such strategies may include a referral to affirmative clergy, particularly when the desire to change is based on religious beliefs.

### **How should I prepare myself to teach affirmatively about sexual orientation and gender identity?**

- Remember that social work education should be guided by scientific research and social work ethics, not personal beliefs (Reamer, 2014).
- Read research on affirmative practice.
- Attend workshops on LGBTQ populations at professional meetings.
- Develop an understanding of personal attitudes toward LGBTQ individuals.
- Acquire broad-based knowledge about sexual and gender identity development across the life cycle.
- Obtain a high degree of comfort and skill in responding to student questions about sexual orientation and gender identity.
- Learn about affirmative community services and programs.
- Ally with organizations and campus groups that support LGBTQ individuals and communities.

### **How do I teach students to practice with the LGBTQ population?**

- Discuss how the NASW Code of Ethics applies specifically to LGBTQ populations.
- Help students to understand the importance of separating personal beliefs from professional responsibilities as a social worker (Reamer, 2014).
- Remind students to use approaches that affirm and celebrate LGBT identities.
- Encourage students to explore client discomfort with their sexual orientation or gender identity using affirmative approaches.
- Remind students that since SOCE have been found to be harmful and unethical, it is clinically risky to provide such treatment.
- Instruct students to seek supervision for improving their affirmative practice skills.
- Ensure that social service agencies, community mental health centers, and health-care facilities provide affirmative environments for LGBTQ persons.

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