



Conversion therapy

Consensus statement

At the request of the Department of Health this public information was prepared by the UK Council for Psychotherapy with the support and assistance of the British Psychoanalytic Council, the Royal College of Psychiatrists, the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy, the British Psychological Society, The National Counselling Society, Pink Therapy and Stonewall.

February 2014

What is conversion therapy?

You may have heard of a practice known as 'conversion therapy'. It is also sometimes called 'reparative' or 'gay cure' therapy.

Conversion therapy is the umbrella term for a type of talking therapy or activity which attempts to change sexual orientation or reduce attraction to others of the same sex.

There is no good evidence this works and we believe it has the potential to cause harm. Often these approaches are based on religious interpretations about sexuality rather than on a researched and informed understanding of sexual orientation.

Conversion therapy in context

Attitudes towards sexuality have changed rapidly in the last few decades.

Historically many psychological professionals saw homosexuality as a form of arrested sexual development. Up until 1973 the **American Psychiatric Association**¹ classified homosexuality as a mental illness. It was not until 1990 that the World Health Organisation declassified homosexuality as a mental disorder.

Though homosexuality is no longer considered a mental illness in healthcare professions, the legacy of this association continues to have an impact.

In this context, some people still seek and inappropriately offer 'cures' and 'treatments' for homosexuality as if it were an illness.

Why do therapy professionals consider conversion therapy unethical?

The major therapy professional bodies in the UK have been united in speaking out against conversion therapy. This is because this particular approach is based on the assumption that homosexuality is a mental disorder, or begins from the pre-conceived view that the client should change their sexual orientation. As homosexuality is not an illness, it is both logically and ethically flawed to offer any kind of treatment.

Conversion therapy suggests to vulnerable people that their sexuality is the root cause of their difficulties. This is misleading and prejudiced. Questions around sexuality and identity can be challenging and difficult. Nevertheless, we believe it would be irresponsible and

potentially damaging for a therapist to offer to try and change sexual orientation.

The UK Council for Psychotherapy states:

'It is exploitative for a psychotherapist to offer treatment that might 'cure' or 'reduce' same sex attraction as to do so would be offering a treatment for which there is no illness.'

The British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy says:

'There is no scientific, rational or ethical reason to treat people who identify within a range of human sexualities any differently from those who identify solely as heterosexual.'

The British Psychological Society has published guidance which says:

'As same-sex sexual orientations... are not diagnosable illnesses, they do not require any therapeutic interventions to change them.'

The British Psychoanalytic Council states:

'The BPC does not accept that a homosexual orientation is evidence of disturbance of the mind or in development. In psychoanalytic psychotherapy, it is the quality of people's relationships which are explored, whether they are heterosexual or homosexual.'

The Royal College of Psychiatrists states:

'The Royal College of Psychiatrists believes strongly in evidence-based treatment. There is no sound scientific evidence that sexual orientation can be changed. Furthermore, so-called treatments of homosexuality create a setting in which prejudice and discrimination flourish.'

To see more detailed statements on conversion therapy from professional bodies in the UK please go to the following links:

- **British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy**²
- **British Psychoanalytic Council**³
- **British Psychological Society**⁴
- **Royal College of Psychiatrists**⁵
- **UK Council for Psychotherapy**⁶

2 http://www.itsgoodtotalk.org.uk/assets/docs/BACP-Ethical-Framework-for-Good-Practice-in-Counselling-and-Psychotherapy_1360076878.pdf

3 <http://www.pschoanalytic-council.org/sites/psychoanalytic-council.org/files/6.2%20Position%20statement%20on%20homosexuality.pdf>

4 http://www.bps.org.uk/system/files/images/therapies_attempting_to_change_sexual_orientation.pdf

5 http://www.rcpsych.ac.uk/pdf/PS01_2010x.pdf

6 http://www.psychotherapy.org.uk/UKCP_Documents/policy/10_UKCP_statement_on_reparative_therapies.doc

What does research tell us about conversion therapy?

All treatments must be both ethical and effective before being recommended by professional bodies or adopted by services such as the NHS. As already noted, same-sex attraction and sexual behaviour are not mental disorders needing treatment. Nevertheless, there are claims conversion therapy should be available to people distressed by their same sex attraction. So is there any evidence that such therapy can change sexual orientation?

Randomised controlled trials are the scientific gold standard for assessing the effectiveness of treatments. There are no randomised trials of conversion therapies.

Recent systematic reviews of the evidence for conversion therapy suggest that studies which have shown it to be successful are seriously methodologically flawed.^{7,8}

Oral history studies of people who underwent treatments (such as aversion therapy) for homosexuality in the 1970s and 1980s also show there is a potential for harm.

We believe that offering to change a person's sexual orientation or control his or her same sex attraction would be likely to reinforce the notion that these feelings are wrong or abnormal. For wider society, it also perpetuates the mistaken belief that homosexuality is a disorder needing treatment.

Support for people in distress about their sexual orientation

In any human population, across all cultures and points in history, some people will have a same-sex orientation while the majority of people will have opposite-sex orientation.

Being gay, lesbian, bisexual, trans or queer does not mean there is anything wrong with a person, but it may create certain challenges which a heterosexual person may never need to even think about.

7 Serovich J, Craft S, Toviessi P, Gangamma R, McDowell T, Grafsky E, 'A Systematic Review Of The Research Base On Sexual Reorientation Therapies'. *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy*. April 2008, Vol. 34, No. 2, 227-238

8 APA Task Force on Appropriate Therapeutic Responses to Sexual Orientation (2009), *Report of the Task Force on Appropriate Therapeutic Responses to Sexual Orientation*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association

Some experiences might include:

- Rejection, bullying or discrimination by individuals and groups who do not understand and accept the diverse range of human sexualities
- Anxiety over how family, friends, work colleagues and the community will respond and be affected
- Pressure by family to seek professional help to change sexual orientation
- Loneliness, isolation, shame and guilt
- Confusion over unexpected attraction to a person of the same or opposite gender, that is different from previous sexual orientation
- Conflict between sexuality and other aspects of identity such as cultural background or religious convictions
- Questions about being or becoming a parent

Talking to a qualified therapist who is open-minded, unbiased and works within an ethical code, can help an individual reflect on these issues, and understand feelings about sexual orientation and identity in a safe and confidential setting.

Seeing a psychological therapist

Psychotherapists, counsellors and practitioner psychologists are trained mental health professionals specialising in helping people to work with complex issues.

People visit therapists for all sorts of different reasons. Bereavement, employment or relationship difficulties are just some of the common reasons why people seek specialist support.

Psychological therapy usually involves talking but sometimes other methods may be used – for example, art, music, drama and movement.

Therapy can help you to discuss feelings you have about yourself and other people, particularly family and those close to you. In some cases, couples, families or groups are offered joint therapy sessions together.

Some of these professionals are also specially trained in sexual issues and, therefore, have expertise in specifically helping people who are experiencing difficulties around their attraction to others of the same sex.

1 <http://www.psychiatry.org/lgbt-sexual-orientation>

Getting help

If you or someone you know is struggling with confused or conflicting feelings around their sexual attraction (of any orientation) then going to see a therapist may be helpful.

While responsible therapists will not offer to convert or change your sexual orientation, they are equipped to assist you in gaining a greater understanding of the way you feel, and to help you work through difficult feelings that may arise in relation to the reactions of family, friends and other members of your community.

If you would like to talk to a psychotherapist, counsellor or psychologist you can seek help through your GP, who should be able to refer you to an appropriate practitioner.

Nevertheless, getting access to therapy on the NHS can sometimes be difficult. If you would like to explore accessing help privately you should ensure that the professional you see is a member of a recognised professional body.

These bodies hold registers of approved practitioners who are governed by an ethical code and robust conduct and complaints procedures in case something goes wrong.

These include:

- [UK Council for Psychotherapy](#)⁹
- [British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy](#)¹⁰
- [British Psychological Society](#)¹¹
- [British Psychoanalytic Council](#)¹²

9 <http://www.psychotherapy.org.uk/index.php?id=32>

10 <http://www.itsgoodtotalk.org.uk/therapists/>

11 <http://www.bps.org.uk/psychology-public/find-psychologist/find-psychologist>

12 <http://www.psychoanalytic-council.org/find-a-therapist>

Who else can help?

If you find your distress comes as a result of suffering discrimination, there are people you can talk to for practical information about what steps to take.

[Stonewall](#)¹³, the lesbian, gay and bisexual equality charity has an information service which provides advice and signposting on issues such as homophobic bullying, discrimination at work, reporting hate crime and asylum. Stonewall's information phone line can be reached on 0800 050 20 20.

[Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays](#)¹⁴ is a national voluntary organisation which support parents and their lesbian, gay and bisexual daughters and sons.

[Pink Therapy](#)¹⁵ offers an online directory of therapists of all sexualities and gender identities who work with gender and sexual diversity clients from a non-judgmental standpoint. They also provide many helpful resources in their online knowledge base.

Further reading

The [British Psychological Society](#)¹⁶ has produced guidance for applied psychologists working with sexual and gender minority clients which other therapists may find useful.

For a perspective on theories of sexual orientation please see the following information from [Stonewall](#)¹⁷.

13 <https://www.stonewall.org.uk/>

14 <http://www.fflag.org.uk/>

15 <http://www.pinktherapy.com/en-gb/findatherapist.aspx>

16 http://www.bps.org.uk/sites/default/files/images/rep_92.pdf

17 http://www.stonewall.org.uk/at_home/sexual_orientation_faqs/2701.asp