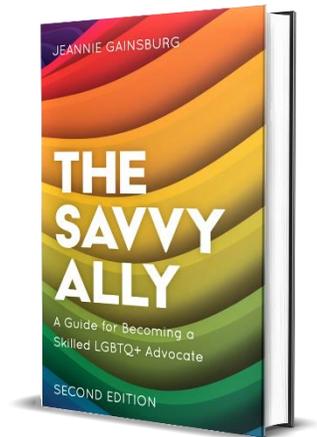


Creating Inclusive Spaces for Older LGBTQ+ Adults

(Sections of this handout were taken from *The Savvy Ally: A Guide for Becoming a Skilled LGBTQ+ Advocate*)

This handout was created for health and mental health professionals and service providers who work with older adults. It offers information on barriers to care for older LGBTQ+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer/questioning, plus so much more!) adults, suggestions for building trust, respectful communication tips, best-practices for creating welcoming and inclusive facilities for older LGBTQ+ adults, and additional resources.



Barriers to Care

The incredible increase in LGBTQ+ visibility and inclusion over the past few decades may make it difficult for some to understand the fears and anxiety experienced by many older LGBTQ+ adults as they consider accessing care. What's important to keep in mind is that older LGBTQ+ adults have survived an era when being open about their orientation and/or gender identity may have resulted in being diagnosed with a mental illness, involuntary electroshock therapy or castration, or being arrested for "sexual deviance." Therefore, older LGBTQ+ adults are more likely to be distrustful of healthcare and mental health professionals than their younger counterparts. Tragically, after living authentically for most of their lives, many older LGBTQ+ adults return to a life of secrecy in their final years.

Several studies have shown that, when compared to older non-LGBTQ+ adults, older LGBTQ+ adults are at an increased risk for disability, mental distress, social isolation, and chronic conditions, yet they are also less likely to access care. These conditions and barriers are even more pronounced among older transgender adults, low-income older LGBTQ+ adults, and older LGBTQ+ adults who are people of color.

Building Trust

To build trust with older LGBTQ+ adults it's important to clearly express that you and your facility are specifically welcoming to LGBTQ+ people. Due to older LGBTQ+ adults' history and their deep distrust of institutions, general statements like, "we don't discriminate here," may not be enough to convince an older LGBTQ+ adult that they will be safe. They are looking for literal rainbows. What does an older LGBTQ+ adult see when they look at your facility's website, advertisements, and physical space? Here are a few pointers for creating a facility that sends a strong message of welcome and inclusion to older LGBTQ+ adults.

- 1) Create a rainbow image or logo and a statement that says: “All families welcome here.” Place it in a highly visible area in your lobby. Use it on your website and on your brochures.
- 2) Post your non-discrimination policies in a highly visible location both at your facility and on your website. Make sure all three of these categories are included in your non-discrimination policies: sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression.
- 3) Develop a separate brochure specifically for older LGBTQ+ adults, making it clear that they will receive respectful and inclusive services at your facility that will meet their specific needs. Add a rainbow on the front to make it eye-catching. Distribute it to local shops, recreational facilities, senior centers, and health and mental health agencies that are frequented by older adults.
- 4) Encourage your agency to show their support for the LGBTQ+ communities by marching in your local Pride Parade and tabling at the Pride Festival.
- 5) Advertise your agency’s services in local LGBTQ+ publications and sponsor local LGBTQ+ organizations and events.
- 6) Purchase LGBTQ+ books and magazines for your library, waiting area, etc.

Respectful Communication Tips

You’ve “talked the talk,” by getting the word out that your facility is welcoming and inclusive; now let’s make sure you’re “walking the walk.” How disappointing to advertise to older LGBTQ+ adults that your facility is an inclusive place, only to have a new transgender client get misgendered or a lesbian client get asked about her “husband.” Here are a few tips for ensuring that your staff members are communicating in a respectful way.

- 1) Ask every client how you may respectfully address them. Regardless of whether someone is a part of the LGBTQ+ communities or not, asking everyone how they would like to be addressed is a great way to make all people feel comfortable and respected. Sharing your own information first can make the interaction more comfortable. For example, “Hi! I’m Dr. Jones. Please call me Lakesha. How may I address you?” If your client is confused by your question, you can simply say, “Would you like me to address you as Mr. Rodriguez, Daniel, or in some other way?”
- 2) Ungender your language. Use “spouse” or “partner” instead of “husband” or “wife.” Use “grandchild” instead of “granddaughter” or “grandson.”
- 3) Mirror terms that people use for themselves and for their loved ones. If a woman tells you that her wife will be visiting her in the hospital, then you have just

received valuable information for being respectful. You should now switch from your previous ungendered term of “partner” to “wife.”

- 4) If you uncover good information on how a client would like to be addressed or how they refer to their loved ones, make a note in the chart for others. For example: “Please refer to this patient as Georgette, even though this is not her legal name, and use ‘she, her, and hers’ for her pronouns.”
- 5) Ask open-ended questions like, “Whom do you consider family?”
- 6) Wear a pronoun pin or attach a ribbon to your name badge that states your pronouns. For example, your name tag might read, “Jasmine Bell, RN,” with a ribbon underneath that says “she/her/hers.”

Pop Quiz

You work at a senior-living facility and one of your residents comes out as a transgender woman. You should: (Choose all that apply)

- A. Thank her for trusting you enough to let you know.
- B. Show your support by buying her some handbags and lipstick.
- C. Ask her what name and pronoun you should now use for her and find out when and where it’s okay to use them.
- D. Ask her if she needs your support in any way.

Answer: A, C, and D

Do ask this resident what you can do to best support her on her journey, but don’t assume that she wants handbags and lipstick. Everyone’s gender expression is unique and personal.

Creating LGBTQ+ Inclusive Facilities

Creating LGBTQ+ safe, welcoming, and inclusive spaces should not solely depend upon the commitment level of individual employees. A solid foundation of inclusion should be established in your facility’s policies and practices. Here are some best-practice suggestions for creating and maintaining LGBTQ+ inclusive spaces for older LGBTQ+ adults.

- 1) Make LGBTQ+ awareness and inclusion trainings a priority by offering a mandatory, annual LGBTQ+ workshop for all staff and by ensuring that tips on inclusive phrasing and respectful LGBTQ+ communication are a part of your new hire manual and training.

- 2) Forms and intake questions can be extremely limiting and frustrating for LGBTQ+ people. Think long and hard about what you actually need to know. *Then* look at whether or not your intake questions and forms are getting you there. Do you need to know how someone identifies their sexual orientation, or do you really want to know whom they consider family? Do you need to know if someone is “male” or “female” or do you really want to know how you should address them? Forms, intake questions, and records should be adapted to your facility’s actual needs, and they should change and be updated overtime.
- 3) There are many reasons, including issues of finances and safety, that a transgender person may not change their name legally. Create inclusive policies around addressing the discordance between chosen name and legal name on documents, name badges, email addresses, etc. Offer privacy for clients discussing personal information.
- 4) Make sure that visitation policies include families of choice.
- 5) Transgender people are often put at risk in public gendered restrooms. If you have “men’s” and “women’s” single-stall restrooms at your facility, replace the old, gendered signs for new “all-gender restroom” signs. If you’re renovating your space, advocate for at least one single-stall, all-gender restroom per floor. Create policies that allow individuals to use the facilities that best align with their gender identity.

Pop Quiz

Who should use an all-gender restroom?

- A. Transgender individuals
- B. Transgender, questioning, and transitioning individuals.
- C. Anyone

Answer: C

Many people think of all-gender restrooms as “transgender bathrooms.” Some transgender individuals will use all-gender restrooms and others won’t. All-gender restrooms are there for *anyone* to use. What this means is, if someone is uncomfortable using the same restroom as a transgender person, then *they* can use the single-stall, all-gender restroom and have their privacy. Tada! Single-stall, all-gender restrooms are also incredibly helpful for older adults who need more space and time in the restroom, older adults with a care giver of a different gender, and folks who like privacy while checking their teeth for spinach.

Resources

Books

Gainsburg, Jeannie. *The Savvy Ally: A Guide for Becoming a Skilled LGBTQ+ Advocate (Second Edition)*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, March 2023.

Killermann, Sam. *A Guide to Gender: The Social Justice Advocate's Handbook*. Austin: Impetus Books, revised and updated 2017.

Guides

Joint Commission. "Advancing Effective Communication, Cultural Competence, and Patient- and Family-Centered Care for the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBT) Community: A Field Guide." Oak Brook, IL. October 2011.
<https://www.jointcommission.org/assets/1/18/LGBTFieldGuide.pdf>.

National LGBT Health Education Center: A Program of the Fenway Institute. "Focus on Forms and Policy: Creating an Inclusive Environment for LGBT Patients."
<https://www.lgbthealtheducation.org/publication/focus-forms-policy-creating-inclusive-environment-lgbt-patients/>.

Videos

Boulder County Area Agency on Aging. "Project Visibility: Person-Centered Care for LGBT Older Adults."
<https://www.bouldercounty.org/families/seniors/services/project-visibility/>.

Maddux, Stu and Applebaum, Joseph (Directors). *Gen Silent*. Massapequa Park, NY: Interrobang Productions, February 18, 2010.

Online Resources

National Resource Center on LGBT Aging at: www.lgbtagingcenter.org

SAGE: Advocacy & Services for LGBT Elders at: www.sageusa.org

Savvy Ally Action: Workshops, consulting, and videos at www.savvyallyaction.com

