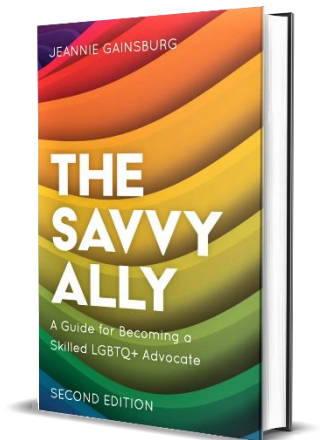


Creating LGBTQ+ Inclusive Health and Mental Health Care

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

Patients who are LGBTQ+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer/questioning, plus so much more) can bring a unique set of challenges and barriers to health and mental health care. A long history of systematic oppression, fears of being discriminated against, previous negative experiences, and current legal inequalities can result in LGBTQ+ patients distrusting health and mental health care professionals and delaying seeking care. Providers and facilities that are explicitly LGBTQ+ welcoming and inclusive are critical for building trust and offering effective care to this population. This handout offers suggestions for creating inclusive agencies, including tips for updating forms, best practices for ally action, best practices for ally advocacy, and additional resources.



Make a Great First Impression with Inclusive Forms

One of the first things patients are asked to do upon entering a medical or mental health facility is fill out a form. What a wonderful opportunity to show immediately that your agency is welcoming and inclusive! Rather than cause stress, medical and mental health professionals can welcome patients with a form that acknowledges everyone and all types of relationships. Here are a few tips for creating the most inclusive forms.

- 1) **Think about what you actually need to know.** *Then* look at whether or not the questions on your forms are getting you there. Do you need to know someone's biological sex, or do you really want to know their gender? Is it important to know someone's sexual orientation or just what they are doing sexually in order to offer appropriate care? Do you need to know if someone is "male" or "female," or do you really want to know how you should address them? Forms should be adapted to your organization's actual needs, and they should change and be updated over time.
- 2) **Ensure that the correct name comes first.** Ask for "name" at the top of the form, and "legal name, if different" lower on the form. This way the person's chosen name will always be the one that is used. Most forms have "name" or "legal name" at the top, with "nickname" or "preferred name" listed later. This can create a situation where the wrong name is used first, which can cause embarrassment and a potentially unsafe environment for transgender patients.

- 3) **Avoid the word *other*.** Typically, “a _____ (fill in the blank) not listed here” is received better than *other*.
- 4) **Advocate for better categories.** If you are restricted to limited multiple-choice options by the databases that you are using, contact these database companies and advocate for more inclusive categories. United Airlines recently added a nonbinary option to its gender selections, and Facebook now has a custom gender option where a person can write in their gender and share their pronoun.

Five Best Practices for Ally Action

- 1) **Ungender Language.** Using ungendered language is a great way to indicate to a patient or coworker that you understand that not everyone is straight and cisgender (i.e., not transgender), and that you are open to hearing about their authentic selves and their loved ones. Use *spouse* or *partner* instead of *husband* or *wife*. Use *they* instead of *he* or *she* if you are unsure of gender. Ask open-ended questions like, “Who do you consider family?”
- 2) **Mirror terms.** One of the simplest and most effective ways to be respectful with our language is to mirror the terms that people use for themselves, their loved ones, and their relationships. 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*.
- 3) **Share the information.** If you uncover good information about how a patient would like to be addressed or how they refer to their partners or loved ones, and the patient is comfortable with you sharing the information, make a note in the chart. 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.”
- 4) **Offer privacy.** Be aware of your surroundings when discussing personal information with LGBTQ+ people and find private spaces for conferences whenever possible. Transgender individuals, especially transgender women of color, are at an extremely high risk for violence. “Outing” a transgender person to other patients may create a very unsafe situation.
- 5) **Ask every patient how you should refer to them.** Regardless of whether you believe someone is 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. Consider offering your information first. For example, “Hi. I’m Beatrice Johnson. Please call me Bea. My pronouns are *she*, *her*, and *hers*. How may I refer to you?” Add your pronouns to your name tag, desk nameplate, and/or email signature.

Helpful Hint

If people always, or almost always, use the correct pronoun when they refer to you, you are likely to find yourself having to answer these questions if you display your pronoun: “Why are you telling me your pronoun? Isn’t it obvious?” What a great educational opportunity! Here are a few suggestions for responding to these questions.

“Displaying my pronoun helps normalize the practice, making it easier for others to do it too.”

“Creating a culture where people display their pronouns helps to avoid those embarrassing moments when you aren’t sure how to refer to someone. When everyone displays their pronouns, we’ll nail it every time!”

“Establishing protocol where everyone is offered the opportunity to share their pronouns avoids having to single someone out by asking them directly.”

“Displaying my pronoun demonstrates that I understand the need for trans inclusive and safe spaces.”



Five Best Practices for Ally Advocacy

- 1) **Advocate for professional development.** Let your administration know that mandatory LGBTQ+ awareness and inclusion trainings should be included in your agency’s diversity efforts.
- 2) **Encourage the use of visible indicators of LGBTQ+ inclusion.** LGBTQ+ people often look for visible signs of support to assess whether an agency is safe and inclusive. Create a more welcoming agency by hanging a rainbow sign that says, “All Families Welcome Here.” Keep an LGBTQ+ magazine in your lobby or waiting area. Use images of all kinds of people and families on your brochures.
- 3) **Ensure that non-discrimination policies are updated and inclusive.** Your organization’s equal opportunity statements, codes of conduct, anti-harassment policies, benefits statements, and non-discrimination policies should include the categories of sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression. Statements of inclusion should be posted in highly visible areas at your workplace and added to your service literature and website.

- 4) **Advocate for a system for calling patients from the waiting area that doesn't involve names.** Use a number system, create superhero paddles, or implement a pager system like some restaurants use. If you create superhero paddles, don't forget to include a few nonbinary superheroes like Aphelion!
- 5) **Educate on the importance of support and patience with transgender patients.** Some transgender people have intense feelings of distress about their bodies. This can cause discomfort and stress even during routine examinations. Some best practices for reducing stress for your transgender patients include asking the patient the words they use to refer to their body parts and mirroring those terms, explaining exactly what the patient can expect during exams and procedures, and giving control to the patient by allowing them to pause or even stop the exam whenever they want.
- 6) **Support ungendered spaces and policies.** Give gendered, single-stall restrooms an upgrade with a new all-gender restroom sign. When buildings are being renovated, advocate for the creation of ungendered facilities. Support policies that allow patients to be assigned rooms and roommates based on their gender identity, not the gender they were assigned at birth. In other words, a trans man should be given a roommate who is also a man, or he should be offered a private room.

Additional Resources

Center of Excellence for Transgender Health: <https://prevention.ucsf.edu/transhealth>.

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

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.
<http://www.jointcommission.org/lgbt>.

National LGBTQIA+ Health Education Center. "Focus on Forms and Policy: Creating an Inclusive Environment for LGBT Patients." Published August 7, 2017.
www.lgbthealtheducation.org/publication/focus-forms-policy-creating-inclusive-environment-lgbt-patients.

Savvy Ally Action: LGBTQ+ inclusive healthcare workshops and consultations, free handouts, and fun 3-minute videos on how to be an ally to the LGBTQ+ communities at www.savvyallyaction.com

