



CONVERSION THERAPY: A Harmful Practice Targeting LGBTQ+ Youth

Conversion therapy refers to any of several dangerous and discredited practices aimed at changing an individual's sexual orientation or gender identity. For example, attempting to change someone's sexual orientation from lesbian, gay, or bisexual to straight or their gender identity from transgender or nonbinary to cisgender.

Talk Therapies

While some conversion therapists continue to use physical methods, including painful aversive conditioning, the most common techniques in the United States today include "talk therapies" that licensed or unlicensed practitioners use in attempt to "treat" a person's sexual orientation or gender identity. They may falsely claim that a person's sexual orientation or gender identity is a result of abuse and childhood trauma, or otherwise a result of the person's environment and upbringing. Conversion therapy has a myriad of harmful side effects, including shame, anxiety, depression, and suicidal ideation.

Conversion Therapy Does Not Work

Conversion therapy is based on the outdated and false notion that being LGBTQ+ is a mental illness that should be cured, despite all major medical associations' agreement that LGBTQ+ identities are a normal variant of human nature. The American Psychiatric Association has not treated homosexuality as a mental illness since 1973 and being transgender is no longer treated as a mental illness since "gender identity disorder" was removed from psychological diagnostic manuals in 2013.

No credible scientific study has ever supported the claims of conversion therapists to change a person's sexual orientation. A 2009 report by an American Psychological Association Task Force found that "results of scientifically valid research indicate that it is unlikely that individuals will be able to reduce same-sex attractions or increase other-sex sexual attractions through [sexual orientation change efforts]."

In recent years, many former "ex-gay" leaders have come out to declare that conversion therapy is not effective and never was.

Conversion Therapy Is Harmful

The risks of conversion therapy extend far beyond its ineffectiveness, and the time and money wasted on "therapies" that do not work. Conversion therapy is strongly associated with negative mental health outcomes and greater rates of attempting suicide.

According to The Trevor Project's 2020 National Survey on LGBTQ+ Youth Mental Health, 10% of LGBTQ+ youth reported undergoing conversion therapy, with 78% reporting it occurred when they were under age 18. Youth who reported undergoing conversion therapy reported more than twice the rate of attempting suicide in the past year compared to those who did not.

Furthermore, a peer-reviewed study published by The Trevor Project in the American Journal of Public Health found that LGBTQ+ youth who underwent conversion therapy were more than twice as likely to report having

attempted suicide and more than 2.5 times as likely to report multiple suicide attempts in the past year.

That's why conversion therapy is widely opposed by professional medical associations including the American Medical Association, the American Psychological Association, and the American Academy of Pediatrics.

A Form of Child Abuse

Conversion therapy amplifies the shame and stigma so many LGBTQ+ young people already experience. Parents who attempt to change their child's sexual orientation or gender identity instill feelings of family rejection and risk, which can seriously fracture their relationship with their child. A 2018 study by The Family Acceptance Project found that:

1. Rates of attempted suicide by LGBTQ+ young people whose parents tried to change their sexual orientation were more than double (48%) the rate of LGBTQ+ young adults who reported no conversion experiences (22%).
2. Suicide attempts nearly tripled for LGBTQ+ young people who reported both home-based and out-of-home efforts to change their sexual orientation (63%).
3. High levels of depression more than doubled (33%) for LGBTQ+ young people whose parents tried to change their sexual orientation compared with those who reported no conversion experiences (16%) and more than tripled (52%) for LGBTQ+ young people who reported both home-based and out-of-home efforts to change their sexual orientation.
4. Sexual orientation change experiences during adolescence by both parents/caregivers and externally by therapists and religious leaders were associated with lower young adult socioeconomic status, less educational attainment, and lower weekly income.

Conversion Therapy in Texas

To date, twenty states and dozens of local jurisdictions have banned conversion therapy for minors.¹ Yet, as the number of states banning conversion therapy grows, Texas remains fertile ground for the practice.

¹ https://www.lgbtmap.org/equality-maps/conversion_therapy

Some practitioners have called setting up shop in Texas a “no brainer,” and even report moving to Texas for the express purpose of avoiding bans elsewhere. Despite the clear evidence that the practice is harmful, providers indicate that demand for their services is booming.²

At present, there are no local bans across the state as statewide occupational boards, not local authorities, regulate practitioner conduct. Thus, such a ban would need to come from the Texas Legislature aimed at the occupations code. A bill to ban the practice received a hearing in the 2019 Texas legislative session but did not receive a vote.

Despite Texas remaining friendly to conversion therapy, Texans of all political, ethnic, religious and geographic stripes support equal rights and protections for LGBTQ+ people.³ LGBTQ+ youth deserve to live in a state that honors their identity and protects and supports their right to be themselves.

Recommendations

Every major medical and mental health organization has condemned the use of conversion therapy. None consider conversion therapy effective in changing sexual orientation or support its use to alter gender identity.

Eliminate harmful practices targeting LGBTQ+ youth, including “conversion therapy.”

Related Bills in the 87th legislative session

- **HB 560** (Israel, D-Austin), **HB 407** (Hernandez, D-Houston), **HB 2516** (Meza, D-Irving), **HB 2753** (Meza, D-Irving), **HB 3196** (Meza, D-Irving), **SB 97** (Menendez, D-San Antonio)

²<https://www.dallasnews.com/news/2019/05/02/we-don-t-need-fixing-texas-debates-ban-on-gay-conversion-therapy-for-kids/>

³ See:

<https://www.kff.org/other/press-release/poll-large-majorities-including-republicans-oppose-discrimination-against-lesbian-gay-bisexual-and-transgender-people-by-employers-and-health-care-providers/> and <https://www.prnewswire.com/news-releases/prri-survey-finds-widespread-support-among-texans-for-lgbt-rights-300817116.html>