

# Autism and LGBTQ+ Identity

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# Objectives

1. Become more familiar with LGBTQ+ terms
2. Understand some of the unique challenges faced by LGBTQ+ autistic people
3. Understand basic principles of an affirming clinical approach

# Terms

- **LGBTQ+:** Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer/Questioning (plus added in recognition of all non-straight, non-cisgender identities).
- **Sexual Orientation:** A person's physical, romantic, and/or emotional attraction to another person.
- **Gender Identity:** A person's internal, deeply held knowledge of their own gender.
- **Cisgender:** An adjective used to describe people whose gender identity is aligned with the sex they were assigned at birth.
- **Transgender:** An adjective to describe people whose gender identity differs from the sex they were assigned at birth.
- **Gender Dysphoria:** Incongruence between experienced gender and assigned sex, which often leads to a desire to transition (socially, legally, or medically)

(GLAAD Glossary of Terms: LGBTQ, Transgender)

# Autism and LGBTQ+ Identity

- Autistic people are more likely to be gender diverse and identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer, or asexual
  - 8-25% of autistic people identify as transgender
- Very limited recognition of LGBTQ+ experiences and needs
  - Fewer opportunities to explore gender identity and sexuality, fewer educational opportunities, and social barriers

(National LGBT Health Education Center, 2020; Hillier et al., 2020; Schalkwyk et al., 2015)

# Autism and LGBTQ+ Identity

- Gender identity being questioned due to autism diagnosis
  - Sexual orientation and gender identity/expression are fluid
  - Special interests  $\neq$  identities
- Executive functioning differences can lead to difficulty getting accommodations

(AANE, 2016; Sorbara et al., 2020; Strang et al., 2018)

# Affirming Clinical Approach

- Person-centered care is key
  - Strengths-based
  - Prioritize goals and health of the client- not guardian's goals for client's identity
- Concurrent treatment of gender dysphoria and co-occurring conditions will improve outcomes for all diagnoses
  - Delaying care puts people at risk for negative mental health outcomes

(National LGBT Health Education Center, 2020; Hooyman et al., 2021; Becker et al., 2018)

# Affirming Clinical Approach

- Avoid assumptions about gender identity, sexual orientation, and health behaviors
- Avoid gendered language (sir/ma'am, young man/lady)
- Ask for, note, and use a person's chosen name and pronouns
- If you make a mistake, offer a sincere and brief apology
- Visual cues (posters, stickers, buttons, rainbow lanyards, etc.)
- Post/provide inclusive health education materials
  - Videos, pictures, diagrams, and models can make information more accessible

(Friedman et al., 2014)



# Resources

- Autistic Self-Advocacy Network (ASAN):
  - Proud and Supported Series
  - Access, Autonomy, and Dignity: A Series on Reproductive Rights and Disability Justice
  - Real Talk: Improving Quality of Sexual Health Care for Patients with Disabilities
- Asperger/Autism Network (AANE):
  - Online resources and support groups for LGBTQ+ teens, adults, and family
- Seattle Children's Gender Clinic:
  - Patient and Family Resources
  - Education and Resources for Healthcare Professionals
- National LGBT Health Education Center: Neurodiversity & Gender-Diverse Youth: An Affirming Approach to Care 2020

# Academic References

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# Questions

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**THANK YOU!**

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