

'Gay conversion therapy' – is it harmful? Frequently asked questions.

*** Q. What is 'gay conversion therapy'?**

A. It is a disparaging nickname given to a field of intrusive psychological and medical treatments aiming to alter a person's sexual desires. Such therapies, using drugs and electronic equipment, were largely discontinued 50 years ago.

*** Q. What therapies are being used today to achieve a similar result?**

A. Many different 'talking' therapies are used to assist individuals who are troubled by patterns of thought and behaviour, which disrupts their quality of life. While society is now largely accepting of homosexual practice, some people are troubled by their experience of same sex attraction, perhaps for reasons of religious faith, or wanting to maintain a faithful heterosexual marriage; others may be concerned about the health risks associated with a gay lifestyle. They therefore want to explore the possibility of reducing those feelings and moving away from those behaviours. There are methods of therapy and counselling which many have found helpful in achieving this result.

*** Q. So is this trying to 'cure' gay people and make them straight?**

A. No. Firstly, Christians shouldn't define people by their sexual feelings or behaviours. Neither are these feelings and practices 'diseases', any more than attraction to pornography is a disease, so talk of cure is inappropriate. Many struggle with unwanted sexual desires all their lives. Then, the initiative for any therapy or counselling should come from the person seeking it. Lastly, while in the past some may have been trying to "convert" gay people in the sense of pressurising or promising change, this is certainly very rare today; meanwhile there are many people who are unhappy with their sexual desires and habits who want to change.

*** Q. Are there many people using these therapies?**

A. No. Because of the statement from the Royal College of Psychiatrists and strong disapproval from LGBT activists, therapists and counsellors have for some time been extremely reluctant to carry out this kind of therapy. The few who do provide this kind of service do it courageously, and usually 'under the radar'.

*** Q. But some people are born gay aren't they? Isn't trying to change who you are going to be damaging - like a black person trying to be white?**

A. No. Sexual orientation is not the same as race. There is no fundamental genetic basis for it. Most research and testimonies of many gay people and LGBT advocacy organisations admit that sexuality can be 'fluid'. Some people can and do change.

*** Q. I've heard some people say that they tried to change, and were harmed by the experience. Is that true?**

A. No-one can argue with someone's feelings or experience. But an individual's testimony of 'harm' must be balanced with the many stories of people who have moved away from gay feelings, identity and behaviour as a result of therapy. But if we are going

to talk about banning a practice, we need to base our case on more than testimonies of individuals, many of whom are driven by ideological concerns and are not neutral. In fact the scientific studies on this subject are inconclusive at best, even the ones referenced by the Royal College of Psychiatrists as a basis for their statement. Their reasons for making their decision to oppose efforts to reduce same sex attraction appear to come from a Special Interest Group and be ideological, rather than based on sound and objective research.

***Q. There are some people who say they are same sex attracted, but celibate. They seem to be not in favour of this therapy. Why is that?**

A. True Freedom Trust have said that though they don't offer this kind of counselling or therapy, they affirm the right of people to seek it. Living Out's main focus is to commend the biblical teaching on sex and marriage, and to encourage and model the idea that being in a sexual relationship is not necessary for fulfilment and godly fruitfulness, ie celibate singleness is good, and that someone who identifies as 'gay' does not have to become 'straight' to be a Christian (as these are terms based on understandings of contemporary culture, not the Bible.) Some Living Out leaders remain exclusively same sex attracted, others have moved away from a gay identity and are now married. While this change may not have happened as a result of therapy in their case, there is no justification for opposing appropriate therapeutic help for others if they so wish.

Q. What does Core Issues Trust believe?

A. Core Issues Trust distinguishes between 'celibacy', an option for those who chose not to marry, and 'abstinence' a duty of Christians to avoid sinful behaviours. It rejects the notion of "orientation", now uncritically used to describe an innate category – preferring instead the term "patterning" which makes better sense of the idea that our behaviours and desires shape the neural pathways in our brains. Core Issues Trust is the only registered organisation in the UK supporting the idea that change in sexual feelings, preferences and behaviours is usefully mediated using professional and pastoral support.

*** Q. How do you stop being gay? Do they use electric shocks? Make people drink stuff and then vomit?**

A. No. Sadly some of those practices have been used in the past, not by churches, but by professional health services. And we prefer not to use the language of stopping being "gay", but moving away from unwanted feelings and behaviours, to allow new desires to gradually develop. There are a number of different methods that people have found helpful, influencing both cognition and affect (emotion).

*** Q If the church offers this therapy, doesn't that send a message that it is unwelcoming to LGBT people?**

A. No, because all are welcome. We welcome people unconditionally. The Gospel does not say "you have to change before you can come in", or promise any kind of definite physical or psychological change in this life. But once people come in, we hope they will hear God's voice through Christ and the Scriptures, and want to change in all sorts of ways. Churches should be facilitating this as part of discipleship - often not advertising it at the front, but responding to people's needs.

*** Q If the Church is hurting the feelings of LGBT people by not banning this therapy, it might be seen as unloving and toxic. Shouldn't we ban it for the sake of our image in society?**

A. Well that depends if the Church is part of the historic Christian Church worldwide. Currently the Church of England is, and it teaches that marriage is between one man and one woman, and sex outside marriage is sinful, and that there are two options for Christian disciples: to be married and faithful to our spouse, or to be single and celibate. Now its true that there are many people who are happy to be in the C of E even though they don't believe and practice what Christ teaches. That's up to them. But there are others, faithful men and women who are same sex attracted. They may identify as LGB and be sexually active. When they come to Christ and hear the teachings of the Bible explained in church, they don't want to ignore it or try to change it. They hear the voice of God saying "I love you, I want the best for you, I want you to change with my help". It might be a single person who wants to live a celibate life, or who wants to get married and have a family. It might be a married man or woman whose same sex attraction is harming their health and home relationships. The church must protect the right of these people to seek the help they want from trained therapists, or from compassionate counsellors in the church.

*** Q. Aren't LGBT rights a matter of justice, which the Church should support?**

A. If the church was forcing people to undergo therapy, or even suggesting that sexual "orientation" change is obligatory, that would be unjust. It would be equally cruel to deny people access to therapy they want, according to their understanding of the faith, which aligns with what the Church of England has always taught.

*** Q. I affirm an orthodox understanding of sex and marriage. Does the Synod motion opposing 'gay cure' have any relevance to the C of E's future teaching on the wider issue?**

A. Yes. If the C of E passes this motion, it will find itself in the position of saying to same sex attracted people that they cannot get married to someone of the same sex, but also they can't seek help in potentially changing their desires. Surely if homosexual feelings and practice are good, then they should be given free expression within relationships and marriage; if they are not good, then people should be free to seek help to change them (repeat: without promising change or pressurizing people to undergo therapy). By passing the motion there would only be increased pressure to resolve this dilemma by approving same sex relationships. Perhaps more significantly, the claim of "harm" would immediately shift from the alleged practices of the counsellors/therapists, to the teaching of the church itself, which would then be increasingly under scrutiny for causing 'harm' to LGBT people.

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