

Reconciliation and Growth Project

10 Ethical Principles to Promote Health When Helping Those Distressed by Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity

The continued use of the terminologies of “reparative,” “conversion,” “sexual orientation change efforts,” and “affirmative” therapies fuels the adversarial tensions among people with different perspectives about sexual orientation and gender identity and expression. Therefore, we advocate leaving that language behind in favor of language that is non-binary and that focuses on resolving the individual’s distress with their sexual orientation/gender identity and expression

1. By leaving this language behind, there is more common ground along the spectrum of beliefs and interventions because we can then share the two core principles of ethical mental-health services: “Do no harm” and “Facilitate individual self-determination.”
2. It is important that we have an appreciation for and understanding of sexual and/or gender minorities.
3. It is equally important that we have an appreciation for and understanding of the religious, spiritual, and other ideological values of individuals and communities.
4. Recognizing the spectrum of identities and values is essential as we interact with people who are dealing with tensions between multiple variations of lived realities.
5. It is important that we utilize approaches that are respectful and compassionate to the lived realities from all points on the spectrum, without dismissing any.
6. It is important to understand that while individuals may experience distress related to their gender identity and/or expression or attractions to same-sex individuals, it does not constitute a “mental disorder.” A person is not mentally ill or developmentally delayed simply because they experience same-sex attractions or a non-binary gender identity or expression.
7. All sexual orientations and gender identities and expressions have the potential of being lived in healthy and unhealthy ways. The focus should be on working to decrease the distress and change unhealthy expressions of sexuality and gender identity.
8. It is essential that we acknowledge the broad spectrum of sexual and gender identities and expressions. The foundational ethical principle of “self-determination” requires that individuals must be supported in their right to explore, define, and articulate their own identity.
9. People have the right to seek change in their lives. Individuals and institutions that command privilege and power have a responsibility to avoid the oppressions of demanding specific types or outcomes of change. Therapies for sexual orientation/gender identity and expression distress are only ethical if each individual is guaranteed a safe environment in which to discover and express their authentic self.