



Advocacy & Services
for LGBT Elders

We refuse to be invisible

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Spiritual Themes in the Lives of LGBT Elders

The lives of LGBT elders can be seen through the prism of seven spiritual themes rooted in a person's search for meaning and purpose in life, as well as in their relationships with other people, causes, and deeply held affinities. Approached respectfully, spirituality can be an important resource for LGBT elders, who, in comparison to non-LGBT elders, have survived a disproportionate amount of trauma, rejection by family of origin, religious discrimination and alienation, legal inequality and lack of legal protection, workplace harassment, financial insecurity, health disparities and insecure access to health care. As a caregiver, you are more able to serve as a healing presence and companion in an LGBT elder's life when you assess and respond to their unique spiritual needs, gifts, and resources. In helping the elder explore what greater fulfillment in life might mean for them, they can begin to identify ways to overcome barriers that are blocking their ability to be whole and build on their strengths in the areas suggested below. When an LGBT elder expresses spiritual distress in religious terms or is seeking reconciliation with a religious tradition or with God, it is appropriate to ask if they would like you to connect them with a known LGBT-friendly chaplain or clergyperson. Remember that people may express spirituality in religious and/or in secular ways.

1. LOVE and BELONGING - People need to love and to be loved, and to know they belong. This is realized most often through feeling a connection with family, friends, like-minded community, people, and/or God. A lack of love and belonging can be experienced as loneliness and a sense of alienation. This happens all too frequently when people are struggling with the challenges of aging, medical needs, and often grieving the loss of family members and friends by death or separation. If a greater sense of love and belonging is an elder's need, you can support them in making community connections with old or new friends, family (if appropriate), and with the LGBTQ community. Your offering of warmth in a relationship can make a huge difference.

2. FORGIVENESS and RECONCILIATION - Especially as they become more aware of their mortality, elders may have a need to forgive people who have hurt them in some way during their lives, and to be forgiven by those whom they have hurt. This can also be seen in the desire to re-affirm and heal broken relationships with institutions, communities, and sometimes God. LGBT elders may begin to focus on those who rejected or punished them because of their sexual orientation or gender identity. When the elder's language of meaning is religious, chaplains and clergy can use appropriate religious liturgy to help the elder with these issues. When the elder is secular, you can explore using secular ritual to address old hurts with people or groups who are far away or already deceased. You can help a person who is seeking closure or reconciliation in relation to significant people in their life by facilitating meetings or written contact,

and by listening and holding the stories that need to be shared in order to be able to put unfinished business to rest and build a sense of one's own wholeness. It is always up to the elder whether who, and how they wish to forgive.

3. TRUST - Trust can be very hard to instill in an elder who has had their trust broken many times in their life. Lack of trust may show itself as fear or interpersonal distancing. You may experience this from LGBT elders who have lived a lifetime of vulnerability to society's bigotry. In offering respectful engagement and a calm presence, and in keeping your promises to the elder, you may help an anxious elder begin to feel less stress and fearfulness. In time, their sense of trust may extend to faith in their own wellbeing, to trusting other health care professionals who are needed to care for them, and also, if they are religious, to feeling God's love and peace. Your full presence, acceptance, and commitment to their wellbeing can help create a sense that life is manageable, and that comfort may be found in relationships with others and with spirituality.

4. HOPE - Some elders feel some despair at what lies ahead with health challenges, loss of some capacities, bereavement, and ultimately death. LGBT elders may be even more cynical based on a lifetime of discrimination, negative experiences with healthcare providers, and living through the height of the HIV/AIDS epidemic. Hope can be nurtured and comes in many forms. Through a consistent relationship, you can help a person grieve and let go of old hopes that are no longer possible, and to identify new hopes that emerge, allowing the elder to look to the future with a sense that each day might yet have opportunity and meaning.

5. MEANING - Elders may express a sense of meaninglessness or boredom. We all need to know that our lives matter, that what we did in the past mattered, and that our present and future also matter. We also need to be treated with dignity to support our daily experience of personal worth. This can be particularly challenging for LGBT elders who may have hidden their true selves for much of their lives and not feel seen. Others may have fought to be out in the world and were part of meaningful LGBT community, and now find themselves in a world of hospitals or nursing homes where they feel like the only LGBT person. Either way, many LGBT elders feel they are not being honored for who they are, what they have contributed, and what they have accomplished. As a caregiver, you can help foster this assurance of worth by engaging in conversations and activities that review how much has changed for the good, the values that have guided the elder's life, and the wisdom that is the elder's legacy. Individuals, groups, and intergenerational gatherings focused on this sort of reflection can be very meaningful.

6. GRATITUDE - The human need and desire to express thankfulness is very strong, especially at the time of leavings, ending, and achievements. Some LGBT elders may want to express gratitude for how much safer our society is now than when they were young, that same-sex marriage is legal, that one cannot be dishonorably discharged from the military for being LGBT, that homosexuality is no longer considered a psychiatric illness, that they can march in the Pride parade and have a great time! And, of course, LGBT elders want to be able to openly express gratitude about personal joys, without self-consciousness related to being an LGBT person and having lived an LGBT life.

You can provide the context for an LGBT elder to share stories about the things they are most grateful for across their lifespan, and then engage in activities that access and build on that sense of fullness. This might include singing, dancing, listening to music, writing letters or poems, praying, making artwork, or even just smiling in an expression of gratitude. You can share in, and witness, these activities, and help increase an awareness of joy in life's blessing. At time an elder will express gratitude to you. Receive it, as the deep spiritual gift it is.

7. IDENTITY - All too often aging can be accompanied by mental decline, dementia, or periods of confusion or loss of memory. In care settings, the person needs to be able to continue living in a manner that is true to their unique identity, and to not be confined -- or only defined by -- illness or diminishment. For elders who have had to hide their LGBT identity for large portions of their lives, the prospect of cognitive impairment can be particularly traumatic, as they fear not being able to mask or translate their identity, and/or also fully losing the capacity to be themselves. Having a conversation with the elder, or their proxy, as early as possible is important so that you know how they want to be known in your setting. Who was this person earlier in life? Would they like their accomplishments, favorite activities, and commitments to be shared with caregivers, and honored? What are the person's favorite tastes in music, food, décor, theater, jewelry, clothing, literature, and art? What is the person's natural daily schedule of waking, eating and sleeping? How can you advocate for supporting the continuity of this elder's unique personhood within your setting?

Conclusion

Whatever your discipline, you can play a role in supporting the spiritual well-being of the LGBT elders in your care. This simple Spiritual Assessment model provides a framework for identifying spiritual themes which may be sources of strength in a particular individual, and spiritual themes which may be causing distress, and in that case, how you might work with the elder toward their greater well-being. If the elder expresses spiritual distress in religious ways, asking the elder if they would like you to connect them with a known LGBT-friendly chaplain or clergyperson is appropriate. It is always the elder who gets to choose the spiritual work to be done.

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