

Executive Summary

This brief fact sheet aims to assist hotlines in working with LGBTQ+ individuals in a crisis response setting. It provides some context for the importance of being LGBTQ+ inclusive on hotlines and then discusses tips for crisis responders in working with LGBTQ+ individuals. A full version of this fact sheet with more information on LGBTQ+ individuals and crisis response hotlines can be found [HERE](#).

Context

An LGBTQ+ Need for Crisis Response Hotlines

LGBTQ+ individuals experience higher rates of suicide than their cisgender, heterosexual counterparts¹. Moreover, LGBTQ+ individuals are disproportionately affected by financial, food, and housing insecurities when compared to their non-LGBTQ+ counterparts; additionally, they oftentimes have less familial support than the average individual, meaning that they rely more on informal networks for care and resources²⁻⁷. LGBTQ+ individuals also experience disproportionate rates of mental health diagnoses that can sometimes lead to crises⁸. They also experience relationship violence and violence related to discrimination⁹⁻¹³. In summary, LGBTQ+ individuals experience disproportionate rates of crises when compared to their heterosexual, cisgender counterparts. Therefore, crisis response hotlines should be prepared to engage the specific needs and experiences of LGBTQ+ individuals.

LGBTQ+ Experiences of Crisis Response Hotlines

LGBTQ+ individuals prefer to reach out to an LGBTQ+ specific hotline over a generalized hotline that is not specific to the LGBTQ+ community^{7,14-17}. LGBTQ+ people reach out to LGBTQ+ specific hotlines because they have confidence that the hotline will be accepting of their identities; additionally, LGBTQ+ callers know that there is an understanding from LGBTQ+ specific hotlines about the importance of anonymity when discussing sexual orientation and/or gender identity^{7,15-16,18}. Additionally, many LGBTQ+ individuals fear experiencing discrimination from general hotlines that are not specific to the LGBTQ+ community^{9-11,15-16}. In addition to LGBTQ+ individuals having a lack of trust in non-LGBTQ+ specific hotlines, LGBTQ+ individuals express more positive and helpful experiences on LGBTQ+ specific hotlines when compared to those hotlines that are not LGBTQ+ specific¹⁴⁻¹⁷.

Some individuals stated that they experienced discrimination related to their LGBTQ+ identity when on a generalized hotline^{9,15-16}. Others experienced fear that these generalized hotlines will involve the police, medical or mental health professionals, housing shelters, and/or mandatory reports related to family, elder, and/or relationship violence^{10-11,13,15-16}. Many LGBTQ+ individuals feel that involving these specific institutions is not supportive of their needs in a crisis.

Though LGBTQ+ people tend to have more positive experiences on LGBTQ+ specific hotlines, hotlines that are not specific to the LGBTQ+ community have more global visibility. Since generalized hotlines are more frequently advertised and more visible across the globe, LGBTQ+ individuals will likely be calling to utilize their services, and some of these hotlines have the potential to serve the vital needs an LGBTQ+ person might have in a crisis. Because LGBTQ+ people will call these generalized hotlines, it is imperative that non-LGBTQ+ specific hotlines have the resources to serve their LGBTQ+ clients well.

Recommendations for Individual Crisis Responders

The following suggestions are based on a review of the literature surrounding LGBTQ+ crisis response. This section specifically conveys research-based recommendations for individual crisis responders who might serve LGBTQ+ clients.

Do not make assumptions. When working with clients, never assume a client's sexual orientation and/or gender identity. When an LGBTQ+ client is misgendered or assumed to be heterosexual by a crisis responder, they may feel misunderstood or unsafe, which has the potential to escalate their crisis-related feelings^{15-16,19}. It is also important to not make assumptions about LGBTQ+ people's experiences. If someone discloses their LGBTQ+ identity, do not make assumptions about their life, their sexual experiences, their gender expression, or even their pronouns. It is best to wait for a client to disclose information to you about their experiences before making assumptions.

Use inclusive language. When working with clients, use gender-inclusive language. When you don't know someone's pronouns, always default to using they/them pronouns (gender neutral pronouns) or using a person's name instead of using pronouns. You may even choose to share your pronouns at the beginning of a crisis call, which could open the door for a client to feel comfortable sharing their own pronouns. Use gender-inclusive words when referring to people and their relationships. Saying words like **person** instead of *woman* or *man* might make an LGBTQ+ client feel safer. Saying words like **partner** instead of *husband* or *girlfriend* might make an LGBTQ+ client feel safe to discuss their relationship.

Research has noted that Transgender and Gender Non-Binary (TGNB) clients experience casual cisgenderism on non-LGBTQ+ specific hotlines frequently¹⁶. Casual cisgenderism occurs when an individual unknowingly or unintentionally utilizes language that assumes a person is cisgender. If a crisis responder enacts casual cisgenderism on a crisis response call, a TGNB client may feel misunderstood or unsafe¹⁹.

Stay curious about LGBTQ+ experiences. Be interested in the lives of LGBTQ+ individuals. Research shows that crisis responders are more likely to assume that issues of violence in LGBTQ+ relationships are less serious; crisis responders are also more likely to ask fewer questions about issues of LGBTQ+ relationship violence when compared to man-on-woman relationship violence⁹. Maintain curiosity about the experiences of LGBTQ+ people, even if those experiences seem different from the societal norm. Utilize active listening skills to pick up on people's identity-related experiences, their pronouns, or details related to their crises^{14,19}.

Be aware of nonverbal communication. When on a crisis response hotline call, be aware of how your nonverbal communication could be received by an LGBTQ+ client – this includes tone of voice, your reactions to disclosure, and other forms of nonverbal communication. Research shows that LGBTQ+ people are acutely attuned to nonverbal communication, particularly when disclosing things about their LGBTQ+ identity or experiences¹⁹. They will be able to pick up on any feelings of discomfort or judgment. This might cause an LGBTQ+ client to feel unsafe with a crisis responder.

Consider the impact of specific events on LGBTQ+ clients. Research shows that LGBTQ+ hotline calls rise when specific societal events that impact the LGBTQ+ community occur²⁰. In particular, the rise of anti-LGBTQ+ legislation across the country has influenced feelings of unsafety within the LGBTQ+ community; this harmful legislation even influences the rate of LGBTQ+ poverty in the country^{1,21-22}. Be aware of how certain events might affect members of the LGBTQ+ community, and be ready to offer empathy to LGBTQ+ callers who are affected by specific events, even if you do not understand.

Offer LGBTQ+ affirming resources. Instead of utilizing institutions or organizations that have the potential to retraumatize LGBTQ+ individuals, consider finding LGBTQ+ affirming organizations and networks to offer LGBTQ+ clients. LGBTQ+ individuals are less likely to pursue services in a crisis unless they know those resources are affirming of their LGBTQ+ identity and experiences¹⁵⁻¹⁷. Work with your organizations to cultivate a list of LGBTQ+ inclusive resources in your community that can be ready to share with any LGBTQ+ clients.

Find other ways to be an ally. Pursue education on and advocacy for the LGBTQ+ community outside of crisis responding. The more that you seek knowledge on the LGBTQ+ community, the more likely you are to be able to operate empathetically when working with LGBTQ+ clients. Educate yourself on LGBTQ+ questions that you have, and do not rely on members of the community to answer all your questions. Remember that you can always advocate for LGBTQ+ people by speaking up for LGBTQ+ inclusive policies within your organization or community, by relying less on institutions and organizations that LGBTQ+ clients may not trust, and by supporting local LGBTQ+ organizations within your community.

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