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LGBT Older Adults: How to Find Affirming Services

Are you an older adult and a member of the LGBT community? If so, getting the proper care and support can be a challenge. Here are a few frequent questions older LGBT folks often ask.

Q. How can I find a healthcare provider that is LGBT friendly?

Trusted friends or colleagues may be the best source of information. Those who have had a good experience with a healthcare provider may be willing to describe the care they received, and answer questions you have. You might choose to call your local LGBT community center and ask for a referral list for healthcare providers. They may also have referral information for other services providers, such as legal, housing, case management, etc. The National Resource Center on LGBT Aging (<http://www.lgbtagingcenter.org/training/agencies.cfm>) has a searchable database of providers who have received their training. You can search by service provider type, training type, and/or geographic area, to see what agencies have participated in NRC trainings. Also, the Gay and Lesbian Medical Association (www.glma.org) and the Human Rights Campaign (www.hrc.org) are two websites that list providers who are trained and knowledgeable about the needs of LGBT people, including older adults. Sometimes websites are not updated with the most current information, so be sure to verify resources. Don't be discouraged; you are worth the extra effort to find a provider who will interact with you with understanding and respect.

Q. Should I come out to my provider?

Yes! LGBT older adults and their services providers have historically had an unofficial "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" policy. While it's obviously your choice, there are many benefits to coming out to your provider. It gives your healthcare provider an opportunity for greater understanding of you and your life. Besides, it takes a lot of energy to live "in the closet" in any context! Once you are "out" to your provider, both of you may be better able to focus on your health, your family, and your life. It is also important for transgender individuals to share their biological gender because of how this may impact treatment.

Q. What is the best way to "come out" to my provider?

Many older adults find that taking a few minutes to chat with a provider while still fully clothed (ideally, even before entering the exam room) is a good time to talk about issues of importance to you. You might consider saying something like, "it is important that you know I am a (lesbian, bisexual, gay, transgender)". Or, if they are taking a medical/sexual history and ask questions about your husband/wife, sexual behaviors, you can say something simple, like: "I'm a lesbian and I don't have sex with men." You might even decide to do a little educating by saying, "My sexual partners are women."

Q. How do I know for sure a provider will meet my needs?

You may want to call the provider's office and ask if this provider currently serves LGBT older adults. How does the person answering your call handle your question? Ask them if staff has received training about the unique needs of LGBT older adults. If this provider has one, explore their website. Is inclusive language used? Are there pictures of same-sex couples? Diverse individuals? Do you see signs/symbols reflective of LGBT culture and history? Finally, pay a visit to the office. What is the atmosphere? Are there LGBT materials in the waiting room, symbols or literature? Are there non-discrimination policies posted? Do the forms you fill out use words like "partner"?

Q. What can I do if I experience discrimination or harassment by my healthcare provider or their staff?

First, know that you are not alone. There are many stories of LGBT people and their partners being discriminated against by healthcare providers. Lambda Legal (www.lambdalegal.org) is one organization that may be able to help. They have put together a fact sheet entitled, "When Health Care Isn't Caring: Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) People and People Living with HIV Speak Out". Another resource is the National Resource Center on LGBT Aging (www.lgbtagingcenter.org). The website contains a vast amount of resources on everything "gay and gray", including legal resources and the protection of LGBT older adult rights.

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