APAGS TRAINING VIDEO:
Navigating Self-Disclosure of Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity with Clients
Transcript

Slide 1

This webinar, *Navigating the self-disclosure of sexual orientation and gender identity with clients*, is the first in a series of webinars presented by the APAGS Committee on Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Concerns. APAGS stands for the American Psychological Association of Graduate Students. APAGS aspires to achieve the highest quality graduate training experience for the next generation of scientific innovators, expert practitioners and visionary leaders in psychology.

With these webinars, we hope to address general areas of interest to graduate students in Psychology that are related to LGBT issues.

This webinar will focus on clinician self-disclosure related to sexual orientation and gender identity.

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This presentation has three key objectives.

To provide some background on the significance of sexual orientation and gender identity disclosures within the therapeutic setting.

To provide an overview of issues to consider when psychology students and trainees are contemplating disclosing sexual orientation and gender identity to clients, and

To pose questions to guide further discussion for psychology students and trainees in applied psychology.

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Background & Significance

Over the past two decades, the literature exploring sexual orientation and gender identity in the therapeutic context has expanded considerably. As a result, we have more knowledge than ever before regarding the unique needs and barriers of LGBT clients in the therapeutic setting.

However, little attention has been given to the issue of therapist self-disclosure of sexual orientation and gender identity.

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All therapists face decisions about self-disclosure regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity.

However, LGBT clinicians may face unique disclosure concerns. The sexual orientation and gender identity of LGBT therapists may be indiscernible by clients. As a result, clients may misperceive or inquire about the sexual orientation or gender identity of LGBT therapists. Thus, LGBT clinicians must make ongoing decisions about if, how, when, and to whom to disclose their sexual orientation or gender identity. Also, LGBT clinicians may fear prejudice or rejection from clients.

These issues may be amplified for psychology students and trainees, who are more likely to be dealing with coming-out issues and disclosure concerns within their personal lives.

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There are a number of issues to consider that can influence the decision to self-disclose.

One such factor is the therapist's theoretical orientation.

It is important to note that although there some orientations may have a dominant perspective regarding self-disclosure, there is considerable variance among practitioners within each theoretical orientation with regard to this issue.

Finally, some approaches to psychotherapy may be less explicit regarding how therapists should think about self-disclosure. If a theoretical orientation does not directly mandate or prohibit disclosure, the decision to self-disclose may be based on factors other than theoretical orientation (such as the trainee's level of comfort/experience).

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Many theories of counseling offer a clear perspective regarding the appropriateness of self-disclosure.

Some theoretical orientations support therapist self-disclosure, some do not, and some do not take a position.

However, even within each theoretical orientation there is variance among practitioners.

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A second factor to consider is the intent of disclosure. Thinking about what is motivating the disclosure can help the clinician determine whether it is for the benefit of the therapist themself or in service of the client's needs.

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One might also think about the potential harms and benefits of disclosure, both for the client and the therapist.

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Not disclosing could reduce the authenticity of the relationship and reinforce heteronormativity. Also, some research suggests that concealing a stigmatized identity can have negative mental health consequences such as depression and anxiety, which might impact therapists who choose not to self-disclose. However, one benefit of not self-disclosing is that it may help keep the focus of the therapy on the client.

Choosing to self-disclose sexual orientation and gender identity might also have its own risks and benefits. It could lead to a rupture in the therapeutic relationship or cause clients to censor themselves in session so as not to appear homophobic. But a potential benefit of disclosure is that it might enhance the relationship by encouraging greater trust and modeling genuineness.

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It may be useful to consider the timing of the disclosure as well as the stage of the therapeutic relationship.

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The relationship between you and the client might need more time to develop before you can feel comfortable disclosing your sexual orientation or gender identity. A therapist should never feel pressured to self-disclose if it feels inappropriate for the stage of the therapeutic process.

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A person's development as a clinician is also relevant to the issue of disclosure.

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Problems regarding self-disclosure can occur when a student in training hasn't yet established a theoretical orientation or a stable sense of professional or personal identity. For example, the therapist may over-identify with the client, or find their own issues spilling over into the session. Difficulties bringing disclosure concerns to one's supervisor, or getting advice from a supervisor who is not competent on LGBT issues, may exacerbate the problem.

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Some clinicians may consider their own individual comfort disclosing their sexual orientation or gender identity. As previously mentioned, revealing information before you are ready may impact your comfort in session or make the therapeutic relationship feel awkward.

With so many different and potentially contradicting influences, disclosure decisions can be complex and fraught with pitfalls for even the most experienced practitioner.

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DISCUSSION AND REFLECTION

The following slides include further questions regarding the topic of disclosure. Personal reflection on these topics and discussion with your peers or supervisor may increase your understanding of disclosure decisions and help you prepare to navigate them. We invite you to pause this webinar as needed to facilitate dialogue and reflection.

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What is your comfort level with sharing personal information about yourself with clients?

Consider whether you have disclosed personal information with clients in the past, and, if you have, how comfortable it was for you to share that information.

Reflecting on your comfort level with and clinical rationale for self-disclosure can help you be better prepared to handle these situations with confidence. Discussing it with other professionals can also be useful.

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How might you prepare yourself to answer a client who asks you if you are lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender?

Thinking ahead of time about how you might respond to such a question may reduce anxiety and increase your comfort level if it actually happens.

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Are there certain types of clients or presenting concerns that would make you feel either compelled or reluctant to disclose?

Consider what these feelings are based on. Do they stem from your theoretical orientation or personal characteristics of the client? Examining your own biases can be helpful in determining if your decision to disclose is truly in the service of the client.

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You may also want to consider questions such as:

How might your perspective on this topic differ based on your development as a therapist?

Where and how can discussions of disclosure fit in the curriculum of training programs? How can supervisors help trainees make good decisions regarding self-disclosure to clients?

And finally

How might the self-disclosure of sexual orientation or gender identity be similar to or different from disclosing other hidden stigmatized identities?

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The following resources may offer social support regarding self-disclosure of sexual orientation or gender identity.

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Here is a listing of references for the content of this webinar.

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Download, distribution, and educational use of these materials is encouraged, provided authorship is credited.

Thank you for listening to this webinar from the American Psychological Association of Graduate Students' Committee on LGBT Concerns. Please visit our website at www.apa.org/apags. There you can get our social media and email information to leave us feedback and suggestions. You can also view additional training resources and learn about ways to get involved in APAGS.