

# Conversion Therapy

What is it?

Why does it happen?

What damage does it do?

*Silent* *Guys*  
Coming out of religion

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## Introduction

Legislation has been passed in New Zealand banning the practice of Conversion Therapy (CT). But for many people, it's not exactly clear what this is.

This booklet will explain:

- the facts about sexuality and gender
- the role of religious traditions in how we perceive sexuality and gender
- the history of CT and religious abuse
- the impact of CT on mental health

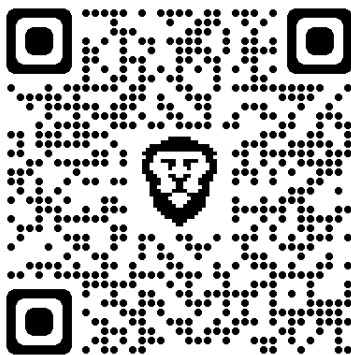
This is by no means an exhaustive resource, but is intended to provide an overview and a starting point to dig deeper into the whole topic.

It will challenge the traditional views of many of us, and that can be uncomfortable if we have lived and invested our lives into a particular religious “paradigm”.

Ultimately, it's all about understanding each other as fellow humans, through knowledge, compassion and acceptance.

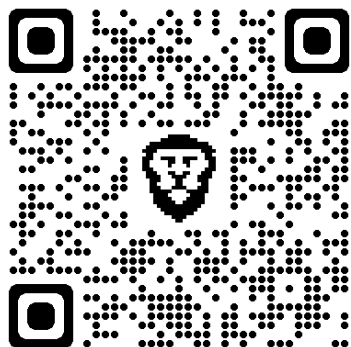
Our goal is to break down the barriers of ignorance and be united in our diversity, bringing love and light to families, whanau and our society.

**For more information, or confidential advice about issues raised in this booklet, contact [info@silentgays.com](mailto:info@silentgays.com), or visit our website [www.silentgays.com](http://www.silentgays.com)**



**For everything you need to know about the legal aspects of Conversion Therapy, and how to access their complaints service, visit the Human Rights Commission website**

**<https://www.hrc.co.nz/our-work/conversion-practices/>**





## LGBT+

### Sexuality and Gender

This topic may be totally confusing – and that’s OK, because it is, sort of.

One of the most basic mistakes we make is defining everything in terms of gay or straight.

We all have probably heard the term LGBT but may not have given it much thought. It stands for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender (or Transsexual or the generic word Trans). Then there’s a heap of other letters we often see added.

There’s I for Intersex, Q for Queer or Questioning, making it LGBTIQ. Then there are Pansexual and Asexual, and the more recent category of Demisexual, So It’s LGBTIQPAD... etc, making the whole label thing totally unwieldy, which is why we often hear the term “Rainbow” community.

“Queer” community is another term, although some aren’t comfortable with it because of the historical use as a derogatory term.

Sometimes “Gay” is also used as a simple term to cover the whole community

There was a push in some circles to introduce the term GSD, for Gender and Sexually Diverse (which I kind of liked), but it hasn’t taken off. So, to keep things simple and clear, I use LGBT+ to cover all the bases.

The rainbow has been adopted as the universal symbol for all things LGBT+. Why, you ask? Just Google Rainbow flag - there’s an amazing history behind it.

Obviously, though, the fact that there are so many categories requires a lot of unpacking.

### Sexuality vs Gender

Firstly, there are four distinct, but broad areas that we are dealing with in the human makeup: biological sex, sexuality, gender identity and gender expression.

**Biological Sex** is defined in the Merriam-Webster dictionary as “either of the two major forms of individuals that occur in many species and that are distinguished respectively as female or male especially on the basis of their reproductive organs and structures”

**Sexuality** defines our physical attractions and romantic desires. Basically, this is what attracts us and turns us on, including that deep emotional connection that only romantic love can define.

**Gender Identity** is the part of us that identifies as masculine or feminine – the “thing” that is described by the generic male or female psyche and expression, or as Wikipedia puts it “the range of characteristics pertaining to, and differentiating between, masculinity and femininity. Depending on the context, these characteristics may include biological sex, sex-based social structures, or gender identity”.

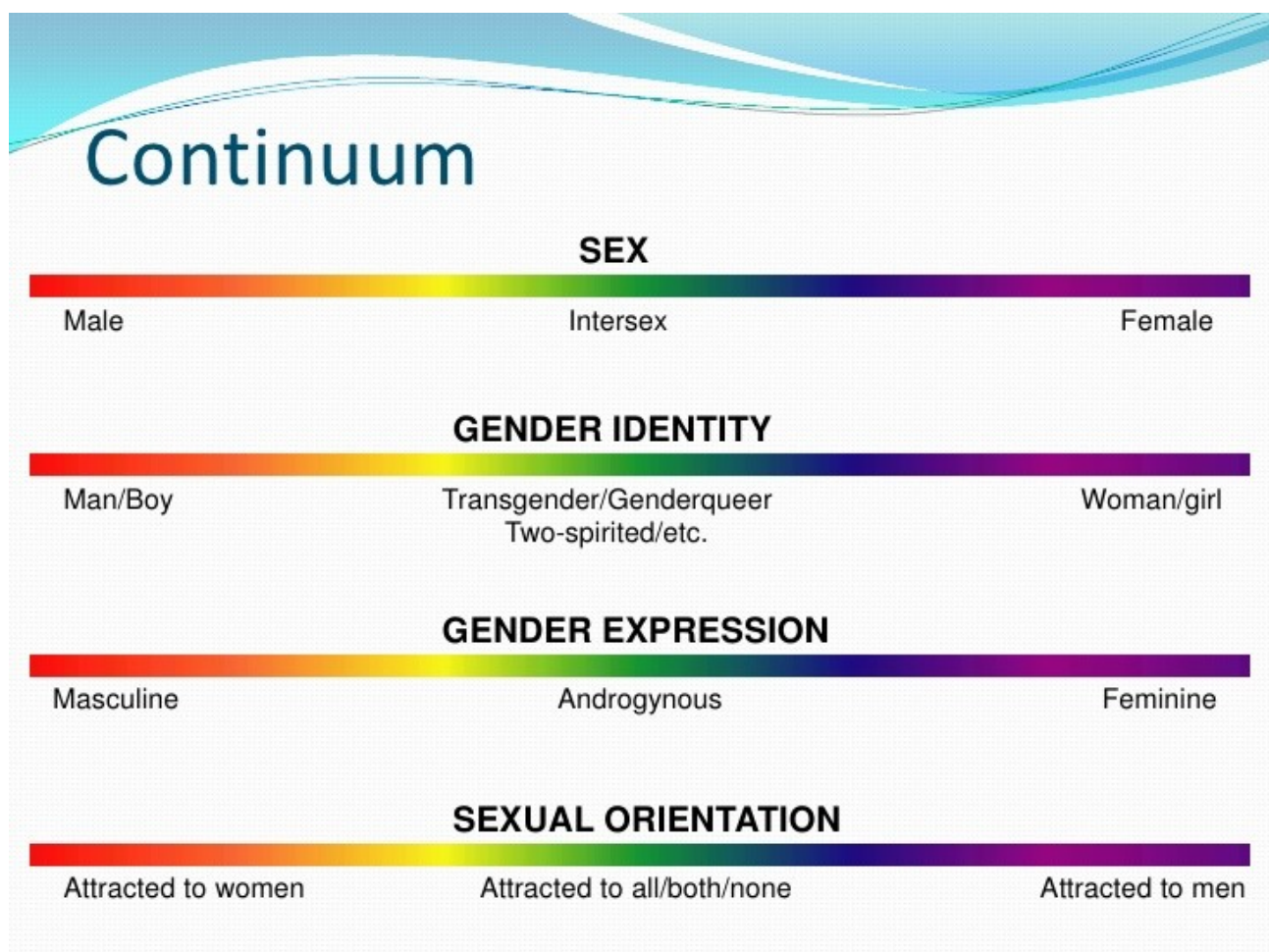
“Cisgender” is a term for people whose gender identity strictly matches the biological sex that they were assigned at birth (from the Latin “cis” meaning “on this side of”) It is the opposite of the term transgender (“trans” being Latin for “on the other side of”).

## Gender Expression

Wikipedia puts it like this:

“Gender expression, or gender presentation, is a person's behaviour, mannerisms, interests, and appearance that are associated with gender, specifically with the categories of femininity or masculinity. This also includes gender roles. These categories rely on stereotypes about gender.”

What complicates this is that these attributes are expressed not as either/or, but on sliding scales. Everyone is somewhere on each continuum.



For most people, realising the complexity of sexuality and gender opens up a whole new way of understanding themselves and everyone else.

It can also lead to a lot of questions and open up a huge can of worms around their assumptions and paradigms.

## LGBT+

### Definitions

Here are some of the most common definitions and labels.

**Gay:** technically this is guys attracted to guys, but it's often used for Lesbians, and as a generic label for everything LGBT+ although many aren't comfortable using it in that way, so probably best to avoid it.

**Lesbian:** women attracted to women

**Bisexual:** someone attracted to either gender. It's also a continuum so could be mostly attracted to one gender, but open to either.

**Trans:** short for transgender/transsexual. This a person who identifies differently from their biological sex. They know that they are, at the most fundamental level, the opposite gender, or neither, or both to varying degrees. Trans people usually know from very young that something is different or "wrong", and of all people in the LGBT+ spectrum, have the greatest difficulties and are the most stigmatised. They have the highest suicide and mental illness stats of any minority simply because they cannot reconcile who they are when there is no understanding or support from their family, religion or society.

Trans people can be Male to Female (M2F) or Female to Male (F2M) or anywhere in between. Some feel the need to completely transition to the opposite sex, others are happy to partially transition. Everyone is different!

**Intersex:** this used to be called hermaphrodite. Some people (roughly one in 1800 depending on various factors and what stats you read) are born with gender "ambiguous" bodies. They could have anything from complete genitals of both genders, to male genitals and ovaries, or any combination of internal and external organs.

There is also a huge range of chromosomal variances that can greatly affect sex and gender identity. The whole idea of xx or xy being the whole basis of our sex and gender is simply not based on fact.

Intersex people face a different set of issues again, and many have had to face the trauma of doctors deciding their gender identity as infants, only to discover that it was the wrong one as they grew. It's a very complex issue!

**Asexual:** this covers people who really have no particular sexual attraction to either gender. They can still experience great platonic love for people, but there is no sexual/romantic nature to the love. There are more people like this than we may realise.

**Pansexual:** Although similar in some ways to bisexual, pansexual people aren't limited to the gender binaries, and can find themselves attracted to people at any point on any of the continuum.

**Demisexual:** Again, similar to bisexual, but with the important difference that physical attraction isn't "triggered" until there is a strong emotional attraction. They can often identify as asexual until they find the right emotional connection irrespective of gender.

There are many more “labels” for different points on the spectrum, including many culturally specific terms, especially amongst indigenous people. As you can see, the idea of simply “gay or straight” is a complete misunderstanding.

When you try to label every possible variation, it starts to get a bit out of hand and occasionally, people get rather obsessed about it.

Never the less, we do need some sort of label to be able to communicate how we feel about ourselves, and who our “family” are. It’s part of our tribal instincts – an innate need to belong – that drives us to define ourselves as part of a particular group.

### **Masculinity vs Femininity**

One of the most confusing problems we face is the concept of femininity and masculinity.

We have looked at the way we identify and express “maleness” and “femaleness”, but there is still the underlying questions of what that actually is.

Many believe it’s learned and cultural, especially when we consider gender roles and expectations, but there are characteristics that are, never the less, identifiable.

**Masculinity** is most often thought of as things like aggressive, assertive, strong, decisive, competitiveness and initiative.

**Femininity** is usually thought of as emotional, nurturing, submissive, gentle, sensitive, patient and vulnerable.

As you can imagine, this is hotly debated from every angle and there really is no clear answer. None the less, we still use the concepts to define sexuality and gender.

Check the Wikipedia entries on “masculinity” and “femininity” – good luck sorting through all that!

So with all that in mind, the revelation of being at any point on any of the sexuality/gender scales can either be a very comforting or very disturbing concept, depending entirely on our paradigms. Without understanding this unique complexity, many simply can’t process what they feel, often leading to depression and mental illness.

## LGBT+

### The Reality

Fundamentalist and traditional religions tend to force all understanding of gender and sexuality into black and white in an effort to determine what is “sin” and what isn’t. For them, it’s either “gay” or “not gay”. The issues of gender identity are also forced into the distinct male or female stereotypes.

Let’s look at this in a more practical sense.

The most obvious understanding, and the most often projected stereotype, is being “gay” – meaning you are attracted to a person of the same gender. This is often termed “same sex attraction” in an effort and keep it simple, although the semantics of the phrase exclude any of the other complexities of the nature of sexuality and gender, which is why traditional religion likes to use the term.

First up, let’s look at the simple issue of who turns us on – who are we OK about having sexual contact with? Is it exclusively the opposite sex? Is the thought of sexual contact with the same sex sort of OK, maybe interesting? Could you go there without being repulsed? Perhaps you are OK with either and have no particular preference?

But this isn’t just about “sex”, it’s about romance and love. It’s about that “spark” that only lovers know. And that spark, for many people, can be with either gender. It’s that feeling when your eyes meet and your heart leaps. Or it can be a slower process of feeling drawn to someone.

For a typical fully “gay” identifying person, the thought of having sex with the opposite gender is as repulsive as a straight person would experience having sex with the same gender. It’s not a conscious decision, or even something defined by upbringing, abuse or trauma. It’s far deeper; its touch, sight, smell (all the senses), and has usually been part of that person for as long as they can remember, or at least when puberty kicks in.

But again, it’s not black and white, and some can find themselves shocked when they find themselves attracted to a different gender. This can apply to either gay or straight people when they can suddenly find themselves falling in love with someone of the “wrong” gender, which can be extremely disturbing and wreak havoc on relationships and families.

Our cultural norms simply aren’t set up to understand the depth of diversity in human sexuality, so anything that expresses itself outside of the status quo, is immediately regarded as an abnormality that needs to be somehow fixed.

There are other cultures that accept some levels of diversity, but even then, most have a religious backdrop that restricts it in some way. Many of the more ancient cultures, including the now homophobic African nations, actually had a very rich culture of acceptance for LGBT+ people that was “demonised” by the influence of western religion.

American Indians have the “two spirit” people and generally accept all variations in gender/sexuality. Although, again, the influence of western culture has changed that.

The New Zealand Maori have a very rich culture around takataapui. Here’s how a wonderful Maori man described it for me:

*“To me ‘gay’ and ‘queer’ and ‘homosexual’, just don’t fully explain or describe how I feel about my expression in this world. Apparently, I am a cis-gendered, exclusively homosexual man. But that just sounds so clinical and cold.*

*‘Takataapui’, literally means ‘sacred same-sex companion’. When you look into Maori folklore you see that Tāne was ‘pansexual’ and polyamorous’ - to use the same language. He was in love with Hinemoa and Tiki. When Tāne addressed Tiki he called him his ‘takataapui’ to remind him that he is spiritual energy first.*

*Their relationship was sacred. Interestingly, takataapui was also traditionally used to describe a relationship with someone that was more than JUST sexual, more than JUST physical, more than JUST emotional, more than JUST psychological. Takataapui is used to describe one’s whole and complete relationship with oneself and the whole and complete relationship one has with another/others.*

*Traditionally Māori had a pantheon of gods, but before them, we had Te Po/ The great darkness, and Te Ao/ The great Light. We had Te Ha/ The Breath and we had Io/Source. I was taught that Io is neither male nor female - Io is beyond all gender. Io is pure energy. This is our source.*

*This is why I love being a tāne-takataapui. I am pure energy made manifest as ‘Kaitoa’, loving life”*  
*~ Kaitoa Te Wheoro*

As we learn about all this, we have to start asking much bigger questions, including for example, the obvious “one mother, one father family” that traditionally provides the backdrop for procreation. No matter what our personal paradigms and biases may tell us, there are alternatives that work, and ultimately our only excuse for ignoring those alternatives is fear.

One of the most damaging preconceptions is that all gay people are effeminate, love dressing up and hanging out in gay bars.

This couldn’t be further from the truth! There are a small number of gay guys who are flamboyant and effeminate, extrovert and bubbly, and these are the ones the public easily recognises and stereotypes the rest with, and the ones the media just loves to promote.

There is also the very butch lesbian stereotype with the short hair, check shirt and jeans. Again, this is just a minority that’s easily recognisable, so is used as the lesbian stereotype.

Here’s the truth – most gay/lesbian people are just like everyone else. They have ordinary jobs, live in ordinary houses and even look like everyone else. In fact, you’d probably never know unless you saw them with their partner. They don’t live outrageous perverted lives wanting sex with everything that moves. They aren’t paedophiles, and most gay people are still trying to figure out exactly what the “gay lifestyle” is!

All LGBT+ people are just that – PEOPLE. Every one a unique human being who experiences exactly the same daily humdrum and dramas as the rest of humanity, whoever and wherever they are.

So to sum up; every single person on the planet is somewhere on the LGBT+ spectrum. Sure, many are definitely at one end or the other of various lines in the spectrum, but many are actually a little further along one of the scales than they would care to admit.



A lot of tough macho guys have a few feminine traits they try to hide, and there are many extremely masculine guys who are exclusively attracted to the same sex, and many extremely feminine women only attracted to other women. There's butch ones and femme ones and everything in between. There's drag queens and cross dressers, guys who are totally "straight" but love to express themselves sometimes as feminine. The sky's the limit!

**Once you step back from the stereotypes you can see a vast spectrum of gender and sexual variety. There simply isn't the "gay/straight" binary – it doesn't exist in the real world!**

## LGBT+ religious paradigms

LGBT+ people are generally rejected and vilified, to greater and lesser degrees, by most traditional religions, (and societies to the extent that they've been influenced by them).

Our religious “paradigm” (the religious “lens” and bias that creates the way we see, interpret and interact with everything) deeply shapes the way we view sexuality and gender. The way our family (immediate and extended), peers, church culture, etc, regard these foundational aspects of our existence, even if never directly spoken of, projects cues, from every action and word, that define masculine and feminine cultural stereotypes.

Most of us are prisoners of our personal paradigms (our “lenses” that create the way we interact with life) until we begin to understand them. They shape our entire framework of life, so as we become aware of them we gain the power to change them. We begin to see the “fruits” of our personal paradigms (be they beneficial or destructive) as we become more objective, and this can be a painful process, requiring a lot of personal honesty and a willingness to see any potential, or actual, damage our views cause.

Having paradigms in the first place, is neither right or wrong, we simply need to be aware of them and how they shapes our lives, and be prepared to work through the assumptions they creates in our thinking.

For those from formalised, traditional religions, their personal paradigms are often extremely dogmatic – affecting our deepest levels of self-worth and our perceived eternal destiny! The idea that your sexual and gender identity can impact your relationship to your God, church and family, and ultimately send you to “hell” can be enough to trigger chronic depression, anxiety, other mental illnesses and suicidality.

The foundations of our beliefs are pretty much “set” around the age of 7, so if you have been raised in a very religious family, there will be powerful biases right at the deepest subconscious level, that colour every thought you have. When the weight of this fact sinks in, it can be rather scary. We can wonder if any of our thoughts are valid, and for some people, this indeed may be a serious issue!

Even for those who have become Christian later in life, the intensity and emotional weight of the doctrines we adopt completely shift our personal paradigms, often producing cognitive dissonance (more on this later).

**The way we perceive and interpret the bible is also completely based on our personal paradigms as well!**

Fortunately, we are all unique beings, and no matter how our personal paradigms have been shaped over the course of our lives, we always have the power to understand and change them.

For LGBT+ people in traditional or fundamentalist religious belief systems, this whole process can be incredibly painful, divisive and even tragic. To come to the realisation that everything you think about your sexuality or gender is nothing more than your unique paradigm created by years of influence and experience, can be a bitter pill, and there is often a process of grief as the reality hits home.

Often, when we begin to break down our religious personal paradigms, we not only see the effects of them on our sexuality and gender, but we can also see how subjective our entire belief system is! How we respond to this is determined by deeper levels within our paradigms. For some, they are comfortable with simply reconciling their beliefs with their sexuality/gender, but for others, the process requires confronting the very foundations of religious belief.

Don't be afraid of where this might lead. Personal integrity and honesty are ultimately the most important values we can pursue, and if that causes us to find new ways of satisfying our spiritual needs, then we rest in the fact that we've done so out of a desire for life, freedom and truth.

## Conversion Therapy

### AKA Reparative Therapy or “Pray Away the Gay”

This is where the rubber hits the road. Religion, and the church by default, are the primary perpetrators of the belief that LGBT+ people are broken and need fixing. And yet, in many ways, we could accuse Anna Freud (Sigmund’s daughter) as the founder of conversion therapy, when in 1951 she published “*Clinical Observations on the Treatment of Male Homosexuality*” in The Psychoanalytic Quarterly and “*Homosexuality*” in the American Psychoanalytic Association (APsaA) Bulletin. In these articles, she insisted on the attainment of full object-love of the opposite sex as a requirement for cure of homosexuality” (*Wikipedia*) that became the foundation of the psychology of homosexuality.

Her ideas were based on Sigmund’s primitive concepts, many of which have long since been debunked but, never the less, triggered an almost pseudo-science about sexuality and gender.

Most disturbingly though, is the unusual relationship between her and her father, and her sexual fantasies, which are recorded in detail, as her own father put her through years of analysis. In hindsight, it appears she was actually suffering from gender dysphoria.

Freud’s theories about penis envy, which were truly bizarre, seem to be entirely based on these analysis session rather than any real research.

Before 1973 it was regarded as a disease, so anything was up for grabs in terms of treatment, including lobotomy, ECT (electroconvulsive therapy), and many other horrific methods that amounted to torture.

Homosexuality is no longer classified as a mental illness, and the United States Surgeon General, David Satcher, in 2001 issued a report stating that “there is no valid scientific evidence that sexual orientation can be changed”.

The only study of any value to be used to support the success of conversion therapy was by Robert Spitzer in the same year, but in 2012 he said it was completely flawed and demanded its retraction by all ex-gay organisations, calling it his “only professional regret”.

The teachings of Leanne Payne starting in the 80s and, probably most dominantly, those of Joseph Nicolosi, set the modern foundation for all Christian conversion therapy.

Although the large, international “ex-gay ministries” are declining as their ineffectiveness becomes apparent and laws are being made to stop the practices, much of Christendom (and related cults) and many other religions, hold on to the principles and methods used by these organisations.

The core principles they espouse state that all sexual and gender deviations from the heterosexual norm are caused by:

- An incomplete bond and resultant lack of identification with the same-sex parent
- Childhood sexual abuse or trauma
- Lack of strong or correct gender role modelling



Nicolosi's style of therapy involves conditioning a man to a traditional masculine gender role where he should:

- participate in sports activities
- avoid activities considered of interest to homosexuals, such [as] art museums, opera, symphonies
- avoid women unless it is for romantic contact
- increase time spent with heterosexual men in order to learn to mimic heterosexual male ways of walking, talking, and interacting with other heterosexual men
- attend church and join a men's church group
- attend reparative therapy group to discuss progress, or slips back into homosexuality
- become more assertive with women through flirting and dating
- begin heterosexual dating
- engage in heterosexual intercourse
- enter into heterosexual marriage
- father children

These techniques completely ignore the complexities of gender and sexual diversity as discussed in earlier topics.

Other groups, such as **Living Waters** and **Restored Hope Network**, styled on the ideas of **Leanne Payne** and **Andy Comisky**, work on much more religious processes. They like to use the term "sexual and relational brokenness" to include anything that doesn't fit into the image of gender/sex relationships as (apparently) decreed by God in scripture. This means they also include heterosexual people with "lust" problems, sexual addiction, and anything outside of the strict biblical binary (although we won't mention all the bizarre marital arrangements of the Old Testament!). This makes it easier to slot LGBT+ issues into the general category of sexual sin and therefore treated in the same manner.

The main technique is to introduce people to the idea that their inherent and utter brokenness can only be restored by the work of Jesus and his sacrifice on the cross that takes our sins and makes us "whole".

It involves a lot of teaching about "biblical based" gender roles and relationships, and how Jesus takes our brokenness onto himself on the cross, which frees us from the guilt and shame and allows us to become truly male or female – as God intended.

It's highly introspective and involves a lot of reflective prayer in small groups, looking for keys to allow the Holy Spirit to open our eyes to all that was broken and see God's father heart in the midst of all that.

These types of groups are perhaps the most dangerous because they appeal to the deep spiritual longing of those who are passionate in their faith. They provide what appears to be very solid biblical and doctrinal teachings in a way that promises life and approval by God.

In reality, they actually feed the "broken image" (Leanne Payne's own term) that the doctrines create in the first place, causing much deeper guilt and shame, resulting in increased cognitive

dissonance and far greater suppression/repression of core identity and, more often than not, an overpowering religious obsession, often involving various ritualistic practices, justified by the need to “renew” the mind by “the Word” (bible) and to stay completely focused on Jesus in every aspect of our lives.

Central to this approach is building a deep, personal relationship with Jesus, which is something I’ll cover in following chapters.

Many extreme fundamentalists claim all sexual/gender issues are caused by demons and will instigate “deliverance” sessions (in whatever guise they can) to cast them out (or “off”). A lot of groups use deliverance as part of their overall approach, mixed with various types of healing prayer and therapy.

### **Deliverance is probably the most damaging “ministry” ever devised.**

It is outright abuse on a very deep psychological and spiritual level, and sometimes even physical. It’s effects on the mental health of any participant are devastating, and if you have ever been involved with it, please get professional help. I can’t stress this enough!

With all of the above in mind, the biggest problem we are faced with is the myriads of churches who practice their particular mix of these methods, completely under the radar of professional and ethical observation.

This means that although the numbers of people attending “official” conversion therapies is declining, the number of discrete or secretive church ministries is still just as bad, or possibly worse than ever. So many churches have their “prophetic prayer warriors” and “spiritual counsellors” who will try to heal a vulnerable LGBT+ victim in whatever way they deem effective, to rid the credulous, deceived and gullible of their sexual perversion. They usually gather a small group of like-minded people with the blessing of the leadership.

Many churches openly offer “help” for “unwanted same sex attraction”, incorporating any number of these unethical and extremely damaging procedures (although this has significantly declined as the law banning conversion therapy takes effect). The end result is countless numbers of people taking part in cult like rituals and/or completely unfounded, unscientific and unethical counselling methods.

In the end, the fruit of these ministries is increased depression, various mental illnesses and suicidal ideation. The incidence of suicide amongst young LGBT+ Christian men, in particular, is one of the highest – a very sad indictment.

The church has a massive dilemma in how it deals with LGBT+ people. They claim it is sin and yet they are completely incapable of offering a real solution to this so called “sin”. They offer false hope and administer dangerous psychological practices, usually resulting in emotional repression, increased guilt and shame (often crippling) and more often than not, severe depression and suicidality.

Amongst all this, however, there is a growing movement that seeks to reach a compromise, saying that it’s ok to be LGBT+ as long as you don’t act on it. They then say that the only solution for LGBT+ people is celibacy.

In terms of adherence to fundamentalist Christian values and traditional interpretations of scripture, this can seem like a viable alternative. There are many support groups that embrace this idea.

However, there are some very deep issues to be reckoned with, the most important being the aspect of religious obsession, which can become overpowering and lead to mental illness, delusions, and isolation from reality.

Celibacy requires a similar route, in that to maintain the disciplines necessary to suppress sexual attraction, a high degree of religious obsession must be purposely nurtured, along with constant repression and diversion techniques. Ultimately, celibates deny themselves one of the most central aspects of our humanity – the need to share ourselves physically, romantically and emotionally on every level with another human. To take on this burden as part of a religious belief system is to deny our intrinsic humanity.

Another problematic area with some Conversion Therapy etc, is that the practitioners are often genuinely caring and loving people.

They show incredible empathy and compassion and often focus on God's "father heart" and how much he loves us. This causes even deeper levels of dissonance for the victim as they completely respect and embrace the love being offered to them. It indicates that God truly appears to love them in spite of their brokenness and offers real hope.

Many leaders and proponents reflect a deep type of obsession around this "father heart" of love, which can be amazingly attractive, especially when they are absolutely sincere and clearly reflect that love in their lives. It also resonates with many because it's very common for children to have difficult or dysfunctional relationships with their father, so the idea of God as a perfect father who can repair the damage is extremely attractive.

### **Is anyone really "changed"?**

This is the million-dollar question, and we have to be very clear on the parameters of the question, but basically – NO.

No one has ever or will ever change their core sexual/gender identity. That's a very straightforward fact. However, it gets messy when we remember the complex nature of sexuality and gender.

If we assume that everyone is either gay or not gay, then some have apparently changed orientation.

What is completely overlooked by ex-gay proponents is the simple fact of diversity – we can be anywhere on any of the sex/gender spectra.

This means that someone who is on the bisexual spectrum can easily claim healing because they are capable of treating attraction to one particular sex as brokenness and/or lust, and then focusing on the "correct" gender. This is the most damaging testimony that people can give, and is the most common. It utterly negates and dis-empowers anyone who is too close to one end of the spectrum to be able to repress attraction to the same sex.

Then there is the whole issue of gender confusion. Some people (such as **Sy Rogers**, as promoted in his early teachings) have made all sorts of claims about sexuality, and yet their entire premise is actually built around gender identity, rather than sexual attraction. They then interpret ALL sexuality issues through their own paradigm of being transgender (or gender fluid), creating complete confusion for those who don't understand their sexuality, and just as bad, convincing the church at large that their views are biblical and correct.

The “feminine” and the “masculine” are traits that have been defined for millennia (as discussed in our earlier topics) and despite their origins and interpretations, are basic components of human nature.

It’s generally regarded that the female “psyche” tends to be more vulnerable to emotional trauma and abuse (and remember that we all can have different blends of the male/female psyche).

This means that if a female is abused by a male in some way, fear and repulsion can be triggered, causing a rejection of the masculine, and subsequently seeking comfort, identity and security in the feminine.

Simply put, women can get abused by men and turn to another woman for emotional support which can then become sexualised, however, this is rare!. This is not to be confused with women who are simply attracted to other women (because that’s just the way they are).

This particular type of emotional/physical abuse can sometimes be “healed” through therapy and attraction to men restored to some degree, but it’s the exception, not the rule.

Conversion therapy groups jump on this to claim that all sexual/gender issues are caused by these types of issues and can be treated successfully.

The facts in this area are, again, quietly ignored. There is absolutely no correlation between childhood trauma/abuse or parenting problems, with sexual attraction or gender identification. Millions of people have suffered all forms of abuse and still remained “straight”, although probably affected in other areas. Once again, it’s an old psychological model that has long been disproved.

But all this begs a far bigger question! Let’s say that a woman IS abused by a man and is not attracted to, or feels safe with men in any way, and as a result finds the relationship she needs with another woman – what’s the problem? Seriously, why do we think it’s a problem? If she is functioning as a healthy human, receiving and giving love, then who are we to say she needs “fixing” in the first place?

In summarising this, we could say that the pain we feel, that drives us to be “straight” and seek forms of conversion therapy, is not from being queer, it’s from the internalised belief that we shouldn’t be queer!

And here is where we start to question the legacy of fundamentalist Christianity and its impact on culture and sociology.



## The Impact of Religion

Our western society (I don't know enough about others to speak with much authority) is built on Christian culture. Sure, it's a shaky, seedy, ambiguous and sometimes horrific one, but it's our heritage none the less. Even the non-religious and atheists are affected at very deep levels by this cultural paradigm.

This heritage has defined our morals, ethics and social beliefs for a long time. So much so that we are convinced of its effectiveness and the superiority of all that is "western" (generalisation of course).

We are taught from our parents, society, peers and politics that our particular world views are the best and the only way decent civilised people live.

We are often taught that one particular interpretation of our Christian heritage is the truth (forgetting, of course, the thousands of different Christian denominations and cults also claiming exclusive truth).

We all too often assume that our traditional attitudes concerning LGBT+ people are part of the untouchable foundations of civilisation.

Our belief system is intrinsically intertwined with our cultural bias. To question one is to question the other. In simple terms, this means that we assume our sexual and gender morality is ordained by God as described by traditional views. Even atheists are often still "infected" by this without even realising the depth of the paradigm it represents (check out the Wikipedia entry "*Role of Christianity in civilization*").

This means that our societal views on sexuality are based on whatever religious doctrines were prevalent during times of national/cultural growth.

One key point we have to remember is that our current cultural definitions of homosexuality aren't the same as the many varied and nuanced descriptions over the centuries. There have always been different ways that all cultures throughout history understood the sexual/gender spectrum. Some aspects were culturally OK, others not, and it changed over time.

The largest sexual shift towards prudery and clear-cut sexual norms in the west, began with things like the Puritan movement (Wikipedia "*Puritans*") and became established during the Victorian era (Wikipedia "*Victorian morality/sexuality*"), especially as Pentecostalism, fundamentalism and literalism found a firm footing among the working and middle class (again, a very broad generalisation).

The strange paradox about the Victorian era however was that same sex intimacy and romance between men, and also between women, was discretely accepted, especially among the higher classes and educated.

There are many historical documents (letters and journals etc) that clearly present these relationships, as well as novels of the era that "hint" at these relationships.

The whole currently accepted concept of homosexuality wasn't even formalised until the late 1860s. Initially it was out of a scientific desire to understand sexuality, and it was also used in a positive

way by “rainbow” people at the time who were protesting against the introduction of Sodomy laws in Prussia (Germany).

There was a push around that time to interpret the bible in very literal ways, but at the same time biblical exegesis was very limited, so the translations and interpretations of scripture were very poor indeed. The science of “Biblical Criticism” has certainly helped our understanding of scripture!

Suffice to say, it ended up that the bible “apparently” said homosexuality (in the sense that it was now defined) was a sin and even an abomination, and there began the extreme downhill run for LGBT+ people.

The impact of all this has been to elevate religious doctrine and dogma above all else, forcing people to choose between their community, family members and relationships and even their eternal destiny, or their personal integrity – a tragic choice to have to make!

History has painted a different picture over the centuries however. The Catholic church used to have same sex marriage liturgy, and there is even a couple of same sex saints.

Even King James (who authorised the version of the bible that bears his name) was as gay as they come (and we have the letters to his lover as proof), but we don’t talk about that one!

Issues of sexuality and gender never had quite the same polarising stigma as they do now. The cultural paradigms of earlier eras were radically different, making it difficult to compare to current attitudes.

We view history through our modern cultural lens, interpreting everything we read with all our assumptions and biases, totally unaware that we are completely misinterpreting significant issues.

There is hope!

Things are changing irrespective of the church and religious beliefs, and in another generation or two perhaps full diversity will be a normal part of life and people will wonder what all the fuss was about!

The hardest part is unravelling the religious biases that have created this mess. Although the “secular” world are streets ahead in all this, the traditional and fundamentalist mind-set is protected by a complex system of dogmatic doctrines, meaning that any attempt to expose its flaws only enforces the belief that contradiction and questions, in any form, no matter how loving or logical, are an indicator of persecution and heresy, reinforcing their stand for God and righteousness. This is truly one of the most damaging issues we have to contend with.

The bible only contains six references that have been used to vilify LGBT+ people. All six have been misinterpreted and mistranslated. There is a vast amount of excellent scholarly discussion on this, and for many people, studying this is a necessary process to unravel this mess.

The impact of having our core sexual and gender identity apparently vilified by God himself leaves very deep scars that affect huge parts of our life, and understanding what scripture really says is often the first step to freedom.

If you want to find out what the bible actually says about homosexuality, start with some Google searches. There is a wealth of scholarly studies that clearly show what the bible really says.

It's not just Christianity of course. The Muslim world for example, is subject to the same hideous dogma, as well as many other religions. Even some sects of Buddhism claim homosexuality is karma for sexual sin in your previous life!

It's a long road to freedom, but there is a huge groundswell of compassion, empathy and love, forcing its way into society.

A good place to start for biblical studies on this issue is [www.whosoever.org/the-bible-and-homosexuality](http://www.whosoever.org/the-bible-and-homosexuality) but there are countless excellent resources.

## Mental Health

Everything we have had to face as LGBT+ people within abusive religious situations leads to some form of mental health issue.

The range of issues can be very diverse but the most common are:

- Depression
- Anxiety
- Suicide Ideation
- PTSD (or CPTSD)

Sometimes it can exacerbate existing mental health problems, for example, in cases of early childhood abuse. Whatever it may be, we are one of the highest rating demographics for mental health problems!

Perhaps the most important aspect of why all this triggers mental health issues is **Cognitive Dissonance**

Dictionary.com describes cognitive dissonance as “...*anxiety that results from simultaneously holding contradictory or otherwise incompatible attitudes, beliefs, or the like...*”

Does that sound familiar?

It's probably the most common cause for distress when we are confronted by the reality of our sexuality and/or gender, versus our religious belief systems. They are, more often than not, mutually exclusive. Simply stated – my beliefs say I am sinful and have to change, but it is impossible for me to change.

This is the primary source of our battles and if not addressed, leads to very serious problems.

With many of the things that can produce cognitive dissonance in all areas of life, there are solutions relatively easily available. For example, if we are addicted to tobacco but we continue to smoke knowing it's bad for us, the dissonance this causes is readily addressed, openly and publicly without much attached stigma, and there is a lot of help available.

For us, however, there is no workable solution within the paradigms of religious belief. The power of those beliefs is so strong that to challenge them increases the dissonance! We become hopelessly stuck between the reality of who we are and the dogma of our beliefs. This level of dissonance, with no way of healthily processing it, inevitably leads to serious outcomes.

Here are the two main methods used in attempts to process the dissonance:

**Denial:** We actively deny and “squash” our sexuality/gender. We constantly reassure ourselves that it's not really a problem and keep attempting to ignore it. We engage in a “heteronormative” life, with varying levels of success, and never stop long enough to admit there's a problem.

This is often expressed by marrying someone of the opposite sex and having a family (often with disastrous consequences).



**Religious obsession:** We recognise the problem, and admit it to ourselves at least, but we have to somehow fight the temptation to act on it. We begin to adopt religious disciplines and rituals, usually fired by deep guilt and shame, which work on a few levels:

- They help to distract us from reality
- They build our “faith” that God will heal us (or at least help)
- They appease our guilt
- They reassure us that we are doing our best to overcome the issue and God will be pleased with us

These are the most common aspects of conversion therapy. We are encouraged to embrace many subtle, and sometimes overt, types of religious behaviour to the point of obsession:

- Constantly recognising and admitting lustful thoughts
- “Renouncing” those thoughts, often through a repetitious structured phrase or prayer
- Taking the thoughts to “the cross”, leaving them at the “feet of Jesus” where he takes the power of them onto himself, leaving us free to move forward without guilt or shame
- Engaging in some sort of personal ritual – either a moment of focused attention and prayer, or a physical ritual such as kneeling before some sort of icon, praying with rosary beads etc. (My personal favourite was reading from the Anglican Prayer Book and having my own little communion)
- Engaging in physical self-harm. This can be any form of self-abuse including inflicting pain on the genitals, cutting etc. Although this is extreme and fairly rare, it is similar to the ancient practice of “flagellation”, one of the more bizarre Christian customs of the Dark and Middle Ages. But it is common to use a rubber band around the wrist which is snapped hard when “sinful” thoughts come to mind.

These behaviours produce even deeper dissonance, simply because they are incapable of changing our sexuality or gender identification in any way while reinforcing our beliefs about the religious system that rejects our sexuality/gender.

## **Internalised homophobia**

This is the other underlying condition that is intrinsically linked with the above conditions. It has been defined as “*the negative stereotypes, beliefs, stigma, and prejudice about homosexuality and LGBT+ people that a person with same-sex attraction turns inward on themselves*” (Wikipedia)

The tragedy of internalised homophobia is the extent and depth of its influence on ourselves, family and friends, and society at large. Here’s a fairly comprehensive list of its symptoms:

- Denial of your sexual orientation to yourself and others.
- Attempts to alter or change your sexual orientation.
- Feeling you are never good enough.
- Engaging in obsessive thinking and/or compulsive behaviours.
- Under-achievement or even over-achievement as a bid for acceptance.

- Low self-esteem, negative body image.
- Contempt for the more open or obvious members of the LGBT+ community.
- Contempt for those at earlier stages of the coming out process.
- Denial that homophobia, heterosexism, biphobia or sexism are serious social problems.
- Contempt for those that are not like us or contempt for those who seem like hidden “gay” selves. Sometimes distancing by engaging in homophobic behaviours – ridicule, harassment, verbal or physical attacks on other LGBT+ people.
- Projection of prejudice onto another target group.
- Becoming psychologically abused or abusive or remaining in an abusive relationship.
- Attempts to pass as heterosexual, sometimes marrying someone of the other sex to gain social approval or in hope of ‘being cured’.
- Increased fear and withdrawal from friends and relatives.
- Shame or depression; defensiveness; anger or bitterness.
- School truancy or dropping out of school. Also, work place absenteeism or reduced productivity.
- Continual self-monitoring of one’s behaviours, mannerisms, beliefs, and ideas.
- Clowning as a way of acting out society’s negative stereotypes.
- Mistrust and destructive criticism of LGBT+ community leaders.
- Reluctance to be around or have concern for children for fear of being seen as a paedophile.
- Conflicts with the law.
- Unsafe sexual practices and other destructive risk-taking behaviours, including risk for HIV and other STIs.
- Separating sex and love, or fear of intimacy. Sometimes low or lack of sexual drive or celibacy.
- Substance abuse, including drink and drugs.
- Thinking about suicide, attempting suicide, committing suicide and self-harm.

As you can see, this is a very extensive list and, of course, not every point on it’s own means we have internalised homophobia. But taken in context, we can see a pattern, and sadly, it’s all too common to see the most vocal anti-LGBT+ people “fall” into the very “sin” they actively denounce.

The range of mental illnesses due to LGBT+ religious abuse is daunting, but it is comforting, to a certain degree, to know why they are there and that there is hope.

## **Addiction**

We must also accept the reality that far too many LGBT+ people suffer from addictions.

This can be the obvious alcohol and drugs, but addiction can exist anywhere in our lives, from sex to constant affirmation, relationships, food... anything really, that we adopt to numb the pain, distract from the reality, or feed the constant unfulfilled needs.

The latest research has found that the key to overcoming addiction is unconditional love and acceptance, especially from a community.

Sometimes we need serious intervention to break habits when they are affecting our health and those around us, but the core need for unconditional love must eventually be faced, and this can be a tough one if the resources simply aren't there to provide it.

The one thing that many people, and especially addicts, say they miss the most about church is the community and, to be honest, there isn't really anything quite like it, especially if it's a healthy loving one.

## Finding help

This can be quite difficult to navigate.

Firstly, we have to determine that what we've experienced as LGBT+ people is some form of religious abuse, even if it's not obviously conversion therapy!

Many religious communities will take great pains to say how much they love LGBT+ people and their actions are based entirely on love. However, if anything I've described in this booklet resonates with you, then no matter what they might say, you have experienced a very insidious form of abuse.

The Human Rights Commission in New Zealand are now actively supporting LGBT+ people. They have set up a process where anyone can be "triaged" to find out the best way forward. This can be anything from referrals to support resources, mediation, reparation, and right through to legal action. Here's their website:

[www.hrc.co.nz/our-work/conversion-practices/faqs-about-conversion-practices/](http://www.hrc.co.nz/our-work/conversion-practices/faqs-about-conversion-practices/)

There are many LGBT+ fully affirming churches if you feel safe enough to explore that option. But it's wise to make enquiries before turning up on their doorstep. There are quite a few wolves in sheep's clothing.

There are also many secular organisations set up to help you find counsellors and therapists that are respectful but have no religious biases. In New Zealand, Rainbow Youth and OutlineNZ are very popular places to start your journey.

I personally run a support service that helps LGBT+ religious abuse survivors through the deconstruction processes to find their own "path to freedom":

[www.silentgays.com](http://www.silentgays.com)

Wherever you go from here, know that you aren't alone. Find people you can talk to – openly, honestly and who don't have a vested interest in the beliefs that have been the source of your suffering. Be gentle on yourself!

**You aren't broken – you don't need fixing – you are perfect, no matter what anyone has told you in the name of their religious beliefs.**

Live loved

Jim Marjoram