

Make Me Over:
Strategies for Addressing the Use of
Conversion Therapy on Youth

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Executive Summary

Conversion therapy, the general term for a variety of therapy-based techniques with the goal of converting lesbian and gay people into heterosexuals, has been used since the turn of the century by a variety of practitioners, including Freud. In 1973, the American Psychological Association removed homosexuality from the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-I) and in 1974 the American Law Institute followed suit when they decriminalized consensual homosexual acts in the Model Penal Code.

Yet those changes were not met favorably by some, who chose to continue to offer conversion therapy techniques under the authority of new professional organizations such as the National Association for the Research and Treatment of Homosexuality. Although conversion therapy groups have previously focused on adults who wanted to change their sexual identity, these groups are now targeting youth and their families to help prevent or stop homosexual leaning.²

In 2002, the first peer-reviewed study of former conversion therapy patients was released. The conclusions from the study indicated that conversion therapy did not work and that it actually leads to many long term issues for the former patients including, depression, isolation and a diminished faith in their own religion.

While we may find that conversion therapy does not affect a large percentage of LGBT youth, it does affect the greater LGBT community in many ways. The basis of conversion

² Dillworth, Mark. "The Treatment of Childhood Gender Identity Disorder." National Association for the Research and Treatment of Homosexuality, 2002 Annual Conference. www.narth.com/doc/treatment.pdf Retrieved 01-23-2008.

therapy is that being LGBT is curable and something that should be worked on to “fix”. Many conversion therapy groups present false information about LGBT individuals; that they are doomed to lead short lives filled with promiscuity and finished with death from a sexually transmitted disease.³ These ideas can affect how other people think about gay people and their fight for civil rights.

There are three strategy areas that the LGBT community can put in place to work towards preventing both the continuing focus of conversion therapy groups on youth and the greater effects conversion therapy ideology has on others.

Data Gathering

There is little data on the “who, where and how” of conversion therapy survivors. While there have been a couple of media accounts of youth speaking out against their parents after they were forced into conversion therapy⁴, there is no qualitative or quantitative data. It is important to have information such as where conversion therapy is taking place and how the therapy is being carried out in order to fully explore the use of conversion therapy on youth.

Creating a LGBT Coalition

There is strength and expertise in numbers. By combining forces, the LGBT community can use all of its resources to help youth conversion therapy survivors. Coalition members should be drawn from both large and small organizations that provide a variety of services to the LGBT community including groups such as the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force and the Human Rights Campaign. Foundations that focus on LGBT issues such as the Horizons Foundation or Funders for Gay and Lesbian Issues should be brought to the table

³ Love In Action “Addressing Homosexuality as Young Adults.”
<http://www.loveinaction.org/media/documents/YoungAdultsRedux1007.pdf> Retrieved 03/20/2008.

⁴ “The is What Love in Action Looks Like” Anticipated release Fall 2008
<http://thisiswhatloveinactionlookslike.blogspot.com/>

to see where interests and funding priorities make a match.

Bringing LGBT Allies on Board

Parent Groups, Religious organizations and psychological professionals, while not directly a members of the LGBT community, are affected by conversion therapy in some way. They would benefit a coalition through the increased awareness they would bring to their broad social and professional networks. In addition, affiliate or auxiliary positions in the coalition gives coalition members a greater sense of how to reach out to non-LGBT individuals who may not know about conversion therapy and it's use on youth.

A broad coalition and the necessary data can give LGBT groups and allies the ability to help youth who may be being forced into treatment because of their sexual identity. The conversion therapy groups are well funded and organized. When LGBT groups take on the issues of conversion therapy, they also need to present their evidence in an easy to-remember manner that instills confidence, not fear, in the parents of LGBT youth.