

# How to cover conversion therapy

Conversion therapy is the discredited and dangerous practice of attempting to forcibly change the sexual orientation or gender identity of LGBTQ people. On September 30, 2012, Governor Jerry Brown signed into law California's Senate Bill 1172, making it the first state in the country to protect LGBTQ youth from the practice. As of January 2019, 15 states, dozens of municipalities, and Washington, DC, have passed measures protecting LGBTQ youth from conversion therapy. However, conversion therapy remains a widespread problem.

In January 2018, the Williams Institute estimated that 20,000 LGBTQ youth in the 41 states that did not protect them from it at the time would undergo the dangerous practice before they turn 18. The Williams Institute also estimates that 698,000 LGBTQ adults in the U.S. have undergone conversion therapy and that 6,000 LGBTQ youth who live in states with laws protecting them from conversion therapy would have undergone the practice if their state had not passed protections.

## Quick Facts

**Every major medical and mental health organization has condemned the use of conversion therapy.<sup>1</sup> None consider conversion therapy effective in changing sexual orientation or support its use to alter gender identity.**

Conversion therapy has a **myriad of harmful side effects**, including shame, anxiety, depression, and suicidal ideation.

Conversion therapy is not just an LGB issue — **it affects transgender and gender nonconforming people, too.**

Conversion therapy includes a range of practices from talk therapy to shock and aversion treatments, **all of which are considered harmful** regardless of whether or not they cause immediate physical harm.

It's important to **include the stories and perspectives of conversion therapy survivors in media coverage if they are ready and willing to share their experience.** Journalists can also talk to other credible voices who can speak to the harms of the practice, including supportive families, religious leaders, teachers, and mental health professionals.

## Best practices for journalists covering conversion therapy

### DO

**DO acknowledge that major medical and mental health organizations have condemned conversion therapy.** More than a dozen mental health, medical, and education organizations<sup>2</sup> have condemned the use of conversion therapy, finding it harmful and ineffective. They have found that sexual orientation and gender identity cannot be forcibly changed.

**DO acknowledge that conversion therapy affects transgender and gender nonconforming people.** Conversion therapy affects the entire LGBTQ community and not just gay, lesbian, and bisexual individuals. Include the perspectives and stories of transgender and gender nonconforming people, as well as the people who support them, when possible.

### DON'T

**DON'T allow anti-LGBTQ groups to masquerade as legitimate medical organizations.** Small anti-LGBTQ groups that support conversion therapy, in particular the American College of Pediatricians (ACPed), can be easily mistaken for legitimate medical organizations such as the American Association of Pediatricians. This group does not represent mainstream medical thinking and was formed because it does not agree with general medical consensus around LGBTQ people. If necessary to include in coverage, include context about these groups.

**DON'T suggest that the most extreme forms of conversion therapy are the only ones that are harmful.** Media coverage often refers to the practice as "gay conversion therapy." This leaves transgender and gender nonconforming people out of the conversation, even though the practice is also used to attempt to change or deny their gender identity.

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.hrc.org/resources/the-lies-and-dangers-of-reparative-therapy>  
<sup>2</sup> <http://www.apa.org/pi/lgbt/resources/just-the-facts.aspx>  
<sup>3</sup> <https://www.apa.org/pi/lgbt/resources/therapeutic-response.pdf#page=50>

## DO

**DO acknowledge that the harms of conversion therapy manifest in many forms.** While many of the extreme conversion therapy practices used in the past are less common in contemporary conversion therapy, they are equally devoid of scientific validity and pose serious danger to LGBTQ people. The American Psychological Association<sup>3</sup> includes depression, suicidality, anxiety, and several other side effects as dangerous social and emotional consequences of the practice.

**DO contextualize anti-LGBTQ extremists and groups if including them in coverage.** If reporting on anti-LGBTQ proponents of conversion therapy, such as when they sue over protections from the practice, outlets should contextualize their extremism and history of anti-LGBTQ work.

**DO recognize that a range of credible voices, in addition to survivors, can speak to the harms of conversion therapy.** While highlighting the stories of conversion therapy survivors helps humanize the issue, there are a range of other people who can also credibly speak about the dangers of conversion therapy. Journalists can turn to affirming families of LGBTQ people, medical providers and mental health experts, teachers, and others who can speak to the success of LGBTQ people who are accepted in society.

**DO recognize that anti-LGBTQ groups are trying to rebrand conversion therapy.** Conversion therapy proponents have attempted to brand the practice as "reparative therapy," "re-integrative therapy," and other names in an attempt to claim their therapies do not involve shame, guilt, or aversion techniques. In fact, the terms refer to the same harmful methods, and there is no difference between them.

**DO include voices that are representative of the broader faith community.** Anti-LGBTQ Christians are not the only messengers for religious communities, and religious leaders<sup>4</sup> across different faiths have condemned conversion therapy. Many faith leaders support efforts to protect LGBTQ youth from conversion therapy, and it is inaccurate to suggest that religious communities and LGBTQ people are at odds with one another on the issue.

## DON'T

**DON'T suggest that the most extreme forms of conversion therapy are the only ones that are harmful.** Conversion therapy involves a range of dangerous and discredited practices that falsely claim to change a person's sexual orientation or gender identity or expression, from talk therapy to shock and aversion therapy. The entire range of these practices is dangerous and ineffective regardless of whether they cause immediate physical pain.

**DON'T uncritically feature conversion therapy proponents, who often have anti-LGBTQ missions and ideologies.** Outlets should be careful not to quote misinformation from anti-LGBTQ conversion therapy proponents. Pro-conversion therapy organizations tend to have long histories of anti-LGBTQ animus and use inaccurate information that may mislead audiences.

**DON'T underestimate survivors' trauma, and know that reliving their stories can be difficult for them.** If interviewing survivors of conversion therapy, be aware that they experienced trauma and respect their boundaries around telling their story. Sharing stories about their time in conversion therapy can trigger depression and other negative outcomes. Survivor narratives can help accurately depict the realities of their experiences and can highlight the harmful impacts of the practice, though outlets should only ask survivors to tell their story if they are ready and willing to do so.

**DON'T treat conversion therapy and reparative therapy as different things.** In reality, both terms mean the same thing, and the distinction is entirely rhetorical and superficial. All forms of conversion therapy, including talk therapy and aversion methods, are included under the umbrella of conversion therapy or reparative therapy. The phrase conversion therapy is generally more commonly used.

**DON'T perpetuate a false dichotomy of 'God vs. Gay' by letting anti-LGBTQ people speak on behalf of all people of faith.** Some media coverage of conversion therapy attempts to pit religious people against the LGBTQ community. Not only is this an arbitrary and artificial divide, it actually misrepresents how Americans feel about this issue. The majority of Americans<sup>5</sup> believe that homosexuality should be accepted, including majorities of most religious groups.

## Additional Resources

- [National Center for Lesbian Rights #BornPerfect Toolkit](http://www.ncirights.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/08/Conversion-Therapy-Faith-Leader-Letter.pdf)
- [Trevor Project Support Center](http://www.trevorproject.org)
- [National Suicide Prevention Lifeline](http://www.nationalsuicidepreventionlifeline.org)
- [GLAAD: Resources for Media Professionals](http://www.glaad.org/resources-for-media-professionals)
- [Dart Center for Journalism & Trauma: Interviewing Victims](http://www.dartcenterforjournalism.org)
- [Media Matters: As advocates work to protect LGBTQ people from conversion therapy, media often fail to explain its many harms](http://www.mediamatters.org)
- [Media Matters: How journalists can avoid spreading misinformation about anti-LGBTQ conversion therapy](http://www.mediamatters.org)
- [Search for Common Ground: Covering Trauma](http://www.commonground.org)

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.ncirights.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/08/Conversion-Therapy-Faith-Leader-Letter.pdf>  
<sup>5</sup> <http://www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study/ways-about-homosexuality/>