

# Coping with Non-Affirming Cultural Beliefs As a Member of the LGBTQ+ Community



## Navigating Non-Affirming Family & Social Support

4 questions with Priscilla Cheng, LMFT

Navigating non-affirming spaces can vary from person to person. Even if one hears the following language promoted, “Live your authentic life! Come out to everyone around you! Be as gay and queer as you desire,” doing so can be a harmful suggestion without knowing any context. Here are some points to consider for these tricky spaces.

### What should LGBTQIA+ individuals consider when thinking about how to navigate non-affirming family or social support?



**Consider your values.** Which values or characteristics do you want to represent? Honesty, peace, friendliness, independence, achievement, freedom, or equity are examples that can guide you towards meaningful decisions. For example, if you value peace in your relationships, then you may not come out as gay to your parents who express hateful attitudes toward gay individuals.



**Meet Priscilla.** Priscilla Cheng, LMFT (they/them) is a genderqueer Christian, a Bay Area native, and a licensed psychotherapist. Their practice, Pride and Grace Counseling, specializes in integrating Queer identity and Christian faith, and working through religious trauma, in order to create affirming spaces in the community and healing for individuals.

Instead, you might spend time with allies from other areas of your life. It's important that you take actions that align with your own values or what's most important to you, versus what you think you "should" do or what you've been told is "right", as these are highly personal decisions.

**Consider your safety.** Take a temperature check of your communities and relationships. Are they red, where it is absolutely unsafe and encumbered with risks of losing financial help or support? Are they yellow, where it is uncertain if they will accept you and your identity? Yellow spaces might be workable or require further exploration.

**Consider your choices.** In my own coming out process, a dear friend told me that my Queer identity is a gift. This advice means I get to choose who to share that gift with! You have the power to make your own decisions - no one else can take that from you. You can choose your actions, words, and relationships.

### What do you advise for LGBTQIA+ individuals who feel conflicted as they try to negotiate their faith with their sexual orientation and/or gender identity?



**Integrating faith and Queer identity is rarely easy.** The world is filled with harmful messages, but your journey doesn't have to be! It can be managed with grace. It can be in connection with others. Below are some suggestions to build support inside and out, wherever you are on your journey.

**Validate yourself.** What you tell yourself is important. You are allowed to provide yourself grace and affirmation. Acknowledge your authentic experiences and feelings. Some statements that helped me are: "I am not broken or a mistake." "I am on a challenging path of identity." Try creating some of your own personal mottos!

**Put on a curious lens.** Give yourself permission to explore your gender and sexual identity. Allow yourself to question social constructs, traditions, terminologies, relationships, and even theology. How do these intersect with each other? Even if these seem rigid on the outside, they don't have to be mutually exclusive.

**Build an affirming community.** A safe and affirming community provides relationships that celebrate you in your whole self. In my personal journey,

Q Christian Fellowship has been an affirming online faith community for me. Where can these relationships exist in your life? What does a support network look like for you?

### What coping skills might help those experiencing distress around these topics?



Resiliency may not come naturally to everyone, but it is still necessary to overcome daily challenges and to heal from past harm. Practicing new skills may seem like empty words or actions at first, but as they become yours, the belief can follow. It doesn't happen overnight. Below are some examples of helpful resilience skills.

**Change your internal narratives.** Transform harmful messages of homophobia and transphobia such as "my being gay is wrong and repulsive." Turn them into statements focusing on kindness, strength, and celebration. Some examples are: "I am valuable and made with purpose"; "I am beautiful and good just as I am."

**Find self-soothing strategies to engage in regularly.** Lean into different senses and experiences to ground yourself when life gets overwhelming. Do you have a favorite show, food, song, smell, or texture? Years ago on hopeless, dark days, I would bury my face in my long-haired cat to be calm and momentarily tune out the rest of the world. Some days, affirming music, such as songs by Tim Be Told, speaks God's love to me and validates my experiences.

**Practice healthy boundaries.** Use boundaries to protect your energy and wellness. Boundaries can apply physically, emotionally, intellectually, and/or sexually. There is always a distressing situation or person, but you can choose the people that you share with, the time that you spend, and the amount that you engage.

### How would an individual in this community might benefit from working with a mental health professional? Any tips for what to ask for in evaluating a provider's ability to address these specialized issues?



The reasons people seek therapy are wide and varied. A mental health professional could help you explore your gender/sexual identity, get support when you're feeling stuck or hopeless, overcome (or at least manage) crippling anxiety, and work through countless other topics. There is nothing too small to work on in therapy; you are a worthwhile investment.

It's important that in therapy you are understood and seen, and also that the provider is qualified and trustworthy. Below are sample questions for a potential provider:

- What kind of experience do you have with faith and Queer identity?
- Are you LGBTQIA+ affirming? What does that mean to you in your practice?
- Do you have lived experience? If not, have you gone through any training or worked with clients of similar experiences?
- What kind of treatment style do you do in therapy? What would it look like for my situation?
- How will I know if therapy is helping? What can I expect?