

## Supporting coming out for LGBT people living with dementia



**Coming out is personal and experienced differently by everyone. When in aged care, lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) people may hide their true identity and feel vulnerable, due to fears of discrimination and that their needs will not be understood.**

People living with dementia can experience changes in behaviour, which can arise from a variety of factors, including stress and the negative impact of past life experiences.

This helpsheet contains information for care staff about the process of coming out and how to support an LGBT person living with dementia.

### What is coming out?

**‘Coming out’ is when someone shares their sexuality, romantic orientation and/or gender identity openly with others. They may come out as gay, lesbian or bisexual. Others may disclose they are transgender. Some may come out as both (e.g. lesbian and transgender).**

The process of coming out is different for everyone. When a person comes out and at what age, is influenced by many factors such as geographical location, religious beliefs, family attitudes and cultural background.

While the term coming out seems to signify a one-time event, it is a process that happens across a person’s life. Not everyone comes out to everybody in their lives or at the same time.

Accepting and sharing one’s gender or sexual identity can be complex and emotional but can also be experienced as freeing.

‘Inviting in’ has grown as an alternative

idea to coming out. **Inviting in** supports the idea that you have the choice to share your sexuality and gender identity if and when you feel comfortable to. This is particularly the case for people from more conservative cultures or religions.

Although the term coming out is often used in the context of transgender people, they often have a different experience which may be best described as ‘disclosure’. Most transgender people affirm a gender that is different from the one they were assigned at birth, rather than coming out as transgender. Although many transgender people identify as heterosexual, there may be additional complexities for transgender people who are also lesbian, gay or bisexual.

The concept of coming out should generally not be applied to people who are intersex, as they often discover their intersex characteristics from parents or medical providers rather than being in the position of making a disclosure.

# Care Staff Helpsheet

## Dementia Support Australia

### Dementia and coming out

**When an LGBT person with dementia moves into aged care and meets new people such as other residents, carers or doctors, they need to decide if and when to come out. This can be a stressful and anxious time and may lead to changes in their behaviour such as agitation or aggression, or the person may become socially withdrawn.**

For transgender people they will not have a choice but to reveal their gender identity because of their physical appearance or their need for specific medication.

When a person living with dementia discloses their sexuality or gender identity, they may face additional challenges from carers and family members such as not being believed, and assumptions about them not having the capacity to make decisions in their life. They also may be fearful that their identity will not be affirmed as their dementia progresses.

Dementia can affect a person's memory and ability to communicate verbally, which can make it challenging to remember their identity or express it to others. Dementia may also cause someone to think of



themselves at an earlier stage of life where they had not yet come out or affirmed their gender. This may cause stress and impact a person's behaviours.

It's important that people living with dementia in residential aged care can safely disclose their sexuality or gender identity if they wish to do so. Supporting people to come out ensures appropriate medical and social needs are met.

### What you can do to support an LGBT person living with dementia

**Every person in Australia has the right to access quality, inclusive and culturally safe aged care services that meet their individual needs and respects their background and life experiences.**

- Create a safe space by using inclusive language in everyday conversation, at intake and during assessment procedures. For example, talk about a partner instead of a wife or husband.
- Ensure all care home forms and documentation are inclusive (refer to ABS Standard overleaf).
- Consider including Mardi Gras/local Pride festivals in the care home's roster of celebrations for people who would like to participate.
- Reassure them that they are not alone. When someone comes out or discloses to you, listen to them without judgement and let them know that you support them.
- Validate the person's feelings and experiences. If the person is confused about their sexuality, gender identity or appearance, refer to them as they refer to themselves that day.
- Find out how the person would like to be referred to and how they would like to express or celebrate their identity and support them with this.

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## Dementia Support Australia

- Only share a person's sexuality or gender identity with others with the person's permission. Remember, that a person may not have come out or disclosed to members of their family.
- Find out about a person's 'chosen family'– a group of people who is chosen by a person to be their family – especially if relationships with their biological family are strained.
- Take the time to learn about LGBT histories and issues, especially those that are relevant to the person coming out to you. This can help you understand their experiences and offer better support.
- If changes in someone's behaviour persists or escalates or care providers are looking to explore ideas around how to support the needs of LGBT people living with dementia, consider referral to Dementia Support Australia who is partnering with LGBTIQ+ Health Australia.

### Resources

- Australian Bureau of Statistics (2020). Standard for Sex, Gender, Variations of Sex Characteristics and Sexual Orientation Variables. [www.abs.gov.au/statistics/standards/standard-sex-gender-variations-sex-characteristics-and-sexual-orientation-variables](http://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/standards/standard-sex-gender-variations-sex-characteristics-and-sexual-orientation-variables)
- ACON. Transhub. [www.transhub.org.au](http://www.transhub.org.au)
- Dementia Support Australia and LGBTIQ+ Health Australia (2022). LGBTI and Dementia: Understanding changes in behaviour. <https://www.dementia.com.au/resource-hub/lgbti-and-dementia-understanding-changes-in-behaviour>
- LGBTIQ+ Health Australia (2021). Gender, Bodies and Relationships Passport. <https://www.lgbtiqhealth.org.au/passport>
- LGBTIQ+ Health Australia (2016). Q Guide: Coming out, inviting in and disclosure. <https://qlife.org.au/resources/qguides>