



# Working With Gay Male Couples: The Good, The Not-So-Good, and The Troubling

**Rick Miller, LICSW**

Couples Conference, 2024

# Gay men:

Mythologized, pathologized, envied, ignored, and oversimplified. Clinicians may be experts in treating heterosexual couples, but too often they miss out on the most effective interventions in working with gay men.







Aren't things  
better for gay  
couples?

Yes, and no.



# Yes

- Greater representation in the media.
- Marriage equality.
- Recognition in the workplace.
- Acceptance with some religious groups.



# No

- Micro-aggressions and aggressive acts continue.
- LGBTQ+ hate crimes on the rise.
- Political climate hurtful.
- Some ethnic, cultural, religious and family lack of acceptance.





# Workshop objectives



You will be adept at identifying specific norms for treating male couples compared to other populations.



You will be able to address how intersectionality complicates challenges for male couples.



You will appreciate how avoidant behaviors impact the wellbeing of male couples.



# About me

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- Psychotherapist.
- Author.
- Founder of Gay Sons & Mothers.
- Psychology Today Contributor.
- Host of the Modern Couples Podcast.



# About me

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- How I became a couples therapist.
- My clinical style.
- 40 years.
- Clinician as opposed to researcher.



# The New Me

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- Greater comfort discussing sexuality.
- Increased flexibility with relationship constellations.
- Increased sessions alone with members of couples to enhance couples work.
- Less rigid about not keeping secrets.





# Mental Health Conferences

have under-represented clinical work with LGBTQ+ individuals and couples.



# The Task of Couple Work

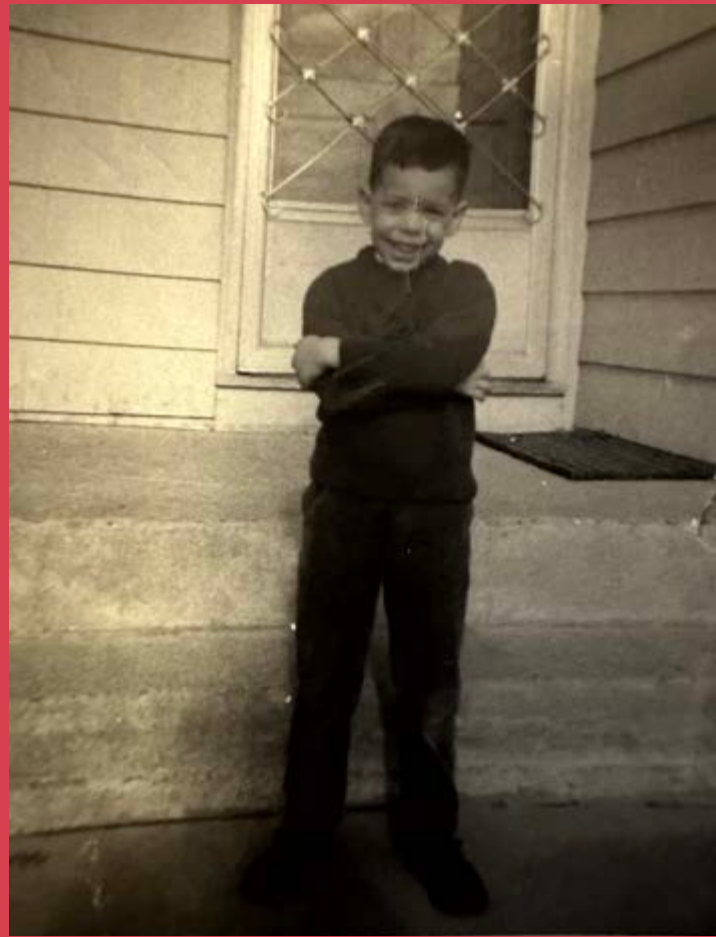
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- History in Family of origin.
- Attachment Capabilities.
- Gender norms.
- Gay Identity Development
- Sexual and Intimacy History.
- Norms in gay community.
- Masculinity Issues.





# My Story



# Realities about gay couples

- Gay male couplehood comes without a training manual or even role models. Most / many gay couples grew up in heterosexual families.
- Many gay couples keep their lives secretive from their family and extended families due to homophobia, especially in religious families, and regions where conservative beliefs are assumed to be true.





# Realities about gay couples

- The men who are coming into your office appear to be successful, together and well-adjusted. They may be all of these things, while also embodying internal wounds that they are unaware of.







# Realities about gay couples

- Very few mentors in the gay community. (Lack of conversation, not worthy of being role model material, homophobia and ageism towards older men.)
- Many older gay men my age and a little older died during the AIDS epidemic.



# Realities about gay couples

- Many gay couples feel invisible and awkward within the gay community.
- A large number of gay couples don't have gay male friends. (Protection, fear of not being good enough, or experiences the scene as not supporting couplehood.)



Experiences of discrimination, specifically acts of antigay violence, are core stressors affecting sexual minorities who are disproportionately exposed to prejudice events.

*Lu, A., LeBlanc, A. J., & Frost, D. M. (2019). Masculinity and Minority Stress among Men in Same-sex Relationships. Society and Mental Health, 9(2), 259–275.*







# Internalized Homophobia

Internalized homophobia occurs when a person is subject to society's negative perceptions or intolerance and they then turn those ideas inward, believing that they are true.



# Internalized homophobia

is significantly and negatively associated with same-sex relationship well-being.

*Cao, H., Zhou, N., Fine, M., Liang, Y., Li, J., & Mills-Koonce, W. R. (2017). Sexual minority stress and same-sex relationship well-being: A meta-analysis of research prior to the US Nationwide legalization of same-sex marriage. Journal of Marriage and Family, 79(5), 1258-1277.*



# Some gay subcultures

may reflect such norms to an even greater degree or with greater intensity, and gay men who fail to fulfill any of these varying ideals of gay masculinity appear to be at disproportionate risk for poor mental health.



- Gay men must additionally contend with masculinity's central tenant of heterosexuality
- Men in same-sex relationships are vulnerable to new forms of minority stress because their relationships increase visibility via others' masculinity.

*Lu, A., LeBlanc, A. J., & Frost, D. M. (2019). Masculinity and Minority Stress among Men in Same-sex Relationships. Society and Mental Health, 9(2), 259–275.*



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# Avoidant attachment style prominent

High need for independence, privacy and secrecy, non-communicative, self-reliant, lives in a world where getting by without being noticed is normal.

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# Sexual Orientation & Mental Health

These findings are some of the first to suggest empirical support for the role of attachment avoidance in accounting for the mental health vulnerability of gay men and lesbians. The results contribute to a better understanding of the minority stress model and should be addressed by practitioners.

*Shenkman, G., Stein, Y., & Bos, H. (2021). The mediating role of attachment avoidance in the association between sexual orientation and mental health. Journal of Homosexuality, 68(3), 461-475.*



# Intimate communication awkward

Most likely nobody has taught him to be vulnerable  
and to communicate about interpersonal  
experiences with those who he is closest to.

# Minority Stress

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- Experiences of discrimination.
- Experiences of rejection.
- Concealment
- Internalized homophobia

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# Negative experiences

were twice as likely to be mentioned as positive ones. They concerned how partners being at different levels of outness and problems with family support stressed the relationship.

# Who does what?

- Roles are problematic in traditional male/female relationships, yet there is an expectation that informs couples how to be.
- Male couples have the challenge and the luxury to divide responsibilities based on strengths and interest, rather than gender.
- Gay male couples have the flexibility of deciding how they want to live rather than accepting heterosexual norms of what a relationship should look like.



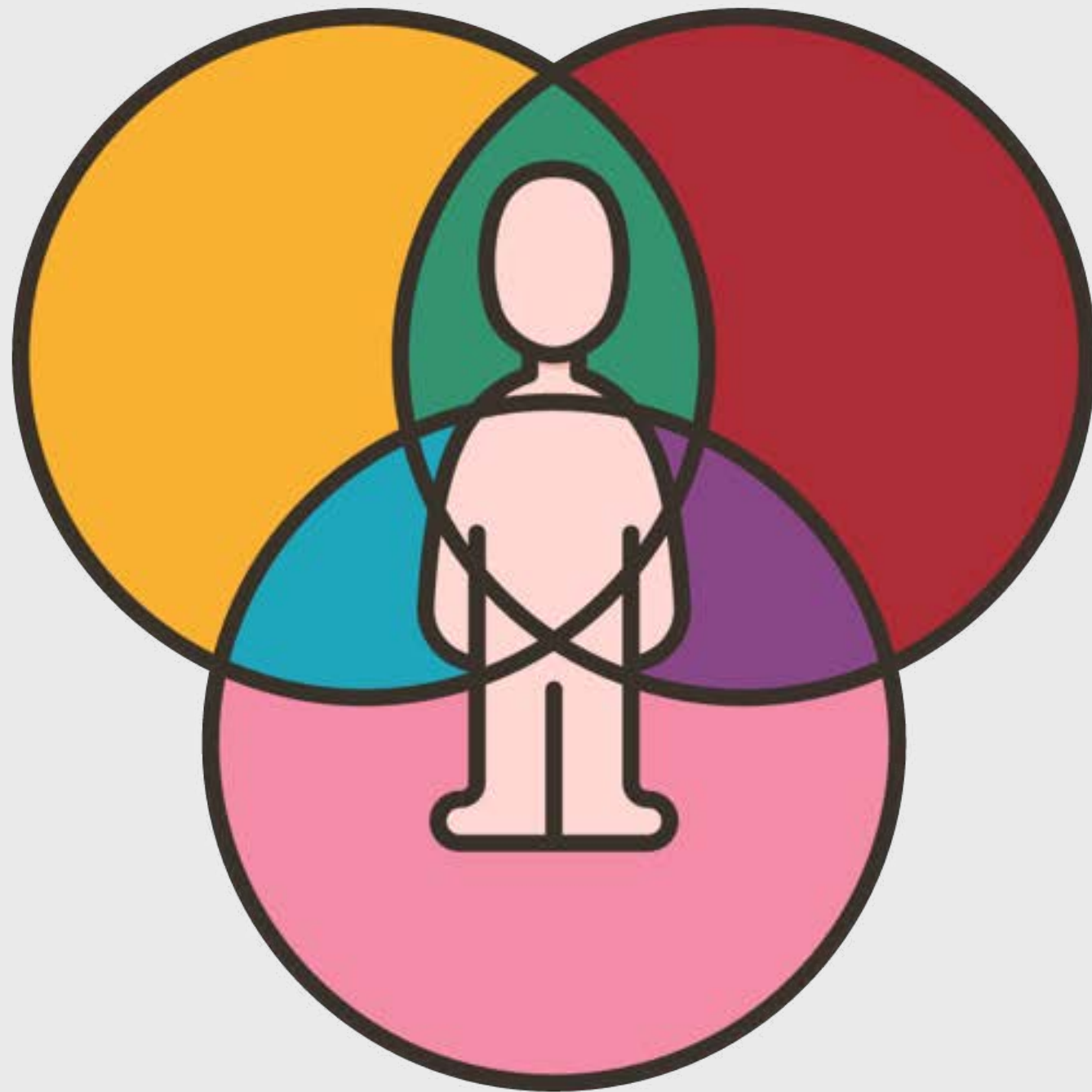


# Our Findings Suggest

The importance of developing strength-based LGBTQ+ affirmative education for emerging adults to promote core relationship processes and strengthen skills to cope with stressors specific to sexual minority romantic partnerships.

*Feiring, C., McMahon, E., & Gall, Z. (2022). Emerging Adult LGB+ Romantic Relationships: Narratives about Met and Unmet Relationship Needs. Journal of Homosexuality, 1-27.*

# Intersectionality



- Joining of gender, race, sexual orientation, and ethnicity.
- Growing up gay in marginalized groups.



# Realities regarding intersectionality:

- Threats and violence can be common experiences in people's daily lives.
- The political climate is reinforcing hatred and violence.



# Identity and Secrecy



Not unusual for those who grew up in homophobic cultures to not be out to their families, or share that they are living with a man.



# Ramifications:

- Partners in not included in conversations with spouse's family of origin.
- Conspicuously absent.
- Major details of day-to-day lives are left out with families.







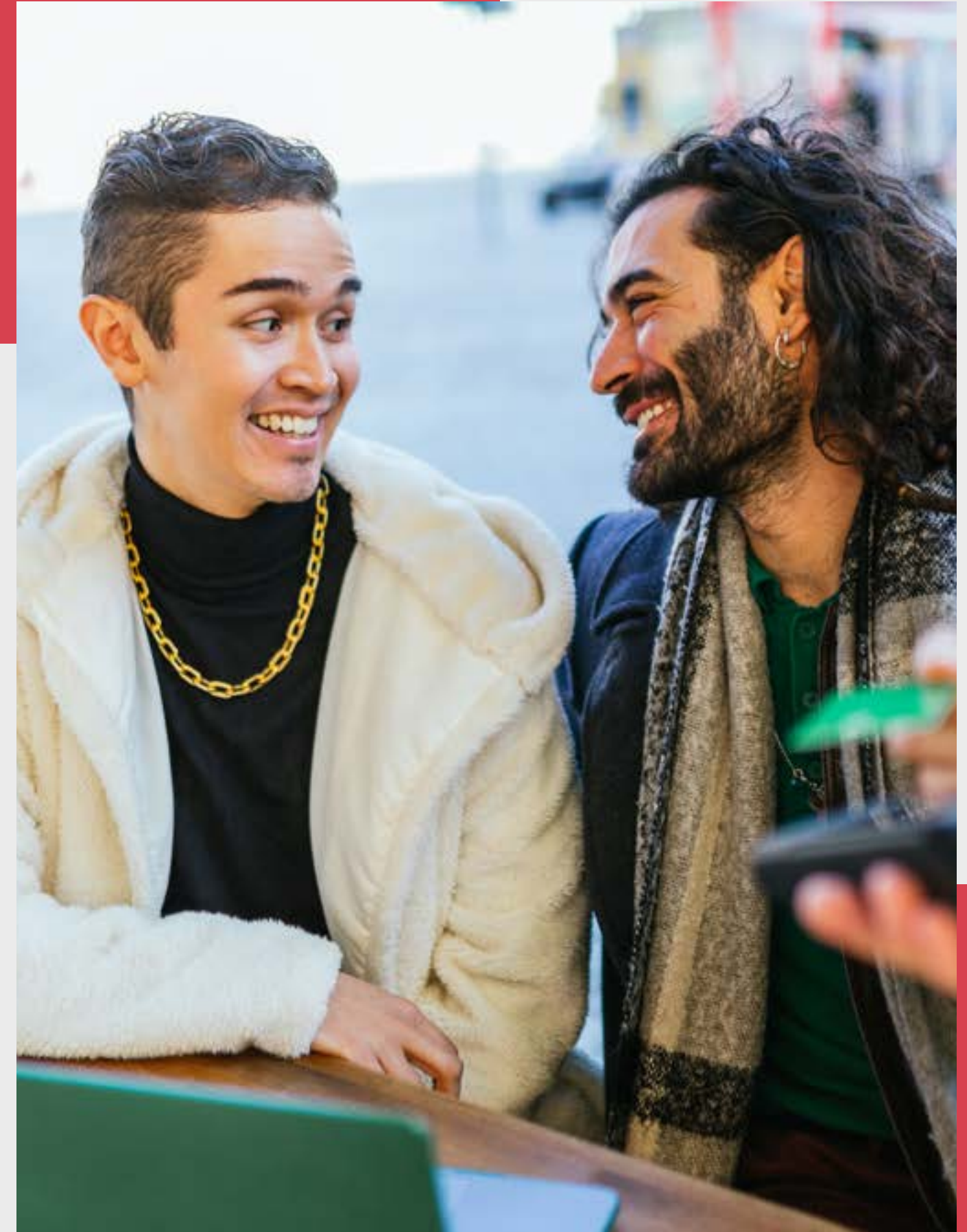
Male couples are good at living life according to how they should live or look:

- in taste
- norms
- style
- cars

Frequently their cultural backgrounds aren't acknowledged as their presentation to the world is concealed.

# Financial discrepancies

- The partner who makes more money or who supports the household is given unspoken power to create the norms of the couple?
- This may include the acknowledgement (or lack thereof) of his partners family of origin, racial/ cultural norms, style, music and food.





# Anxiety-related mental health disorders

Sexual minority (i.e., gay, bisexual, men who have sex with men [MSM], queer) men (SMM) experience disproportionate rates of anxiety-related mental health disorders. In fact, SMM have been found to have higher rates of panic disorder with and without agoraphobia, social anxiety, specific phobia, and generalized anxiety disorder compared to heterosexual men.

*Jonathan Mathias Lassiter, Jared K. O'Garro-Moore, Kainaat Anwar, Stacy W. Smallwood, Inger E. Burnett-Zeigler, Lara Stepleman, K. Marie Sizemore, Christian Grov & H. Jonathon Rendina (2023) Spirituality, self-compassion, and anxiety among sexual minority men: a longitudinal mediation analysis, Anxiety, Stress, & Coping, 36:2, 229-240.*





# Couple's Therapy Goals



- Elicit powerful conversations about the couples roots.
- Highlight how unconscious forces are embedded in the system.
- Make culture conscious, known, and owned.
- Bring their histories, families, and communities into the room.



# Few Couple Clinicians Are...

- available to work with Black, Latino or Asian Couples.
- skilled in working with trans and non-binary couples.



# Norms within the gay community regarding sex

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- Liberal attitudes regarding sexuality.
- Hook-up culture and apps.
- Avoidance of understanding or communication common.
- Open relationships common for male couples (frequently used as the solution for everything).







# Norms within the gay community regarding sex

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- Emphasis on external appearance (monetary success, body image, taste).
- Pornography use expected.

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# What is thought of as porn?

- Photos?
- Platforms like IG, Pornhub, Twitter (X)?
- Engaging on hook up apps?

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# What about...

- Direct messaging.
- Sexting.
- Live performances model/actor.
- Camming with others?



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- Spirituality and self-compassion may be two such positive psychological factors that can contribute to better mental health among SMM.
  - Emphasize the importance of the sacred (i.e., spirit) to sexual minority people's health. Spirituality – a multidimensional and transcendent personal relationship with the sacred – is a culturally-relevant factor among many SMM.

*Jonathan Mathias Lassiter, Jared K. O'Garro-Moore, Kainaat Anwar, Stacy W. Smallwood, Inger E. Burnett-Zeigler, Lara Stepleman, K. Marie Sizemore, Christian Grov & H. Jonathon Rendina (2023) Spirituality, self-compassion, and anxiety among sexual minority men: a longitudinal mediation analysis, Anxiety, Stress, & Coping, 36:2, 229-240.*

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# Your challenge (therapist)

- Self-assessment about discussing sexuality.
- Casual and accepting tone needed.
- Avoid microaggressions and feeling surprised by sexual norms within the gay community.
- Avoid challenging client about gay norms.
- Get consultation and ask your friends/colleagues for help.



# Your challenge (therapist)

- Okay not to know and mention this to clients.
- Acknowledge with honesty to your clients about your experiences.
- Share cases with colleagues who have an expertise in sexuality and couples.
- Consider referrals to tantric coaches, surrogate partner coaching, bodyworkers.





# Role of Clinician

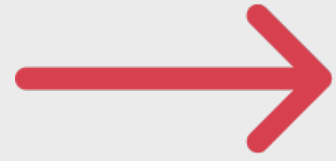
## What do you do?

- If you aren't gay?
- If you are a heterosexual male?
- Refer out vs keep the referral.
- Healing aspects of working with a non-gay male provider.
- Warmth/acceptance/comfort key.

# Expanding your boundaries

- Open relationships
- Polyamorous
- Thruples





# Modern Treatment Options



- Tele-therapy vs in person.
- Together vs separate sessions.



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# Chosen Family



# Thank You!

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