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# Rainbow experiences of accessing mental health support in Aotearoa



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# A quick note on language





## Background

- Rainbow people report higher rates of depression, anxiety, suicidality
- Mental health disparities due to stigma and discrimination
- We need interventions at the societal level *and* the individual level
- Are our mental health services providing the right kind of support?

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**What happens when  
queer, trans, and  
intersex people  
seek support from  
mental health services  
in Aotearoa?**

**How can these  
experiences inform the  
provision of mental  
health care for  
rainbow clients?**

# Stages of the project

## Interviews



$N = 34$

## Online survey



$N = 1575$

## Resource development



for practitioners

# Community partners



# Interview recruitment



# — Therapy is a microcosm of the world

"I think that our mental health system is indicative of our entire society (...) There is no explicit difference in terms of the way **the culture of our mental health system is the same as the culture of our society**, and so all the same rules apply"

Taylor, cis woman, lesbian, early twenties



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# Signalling safety

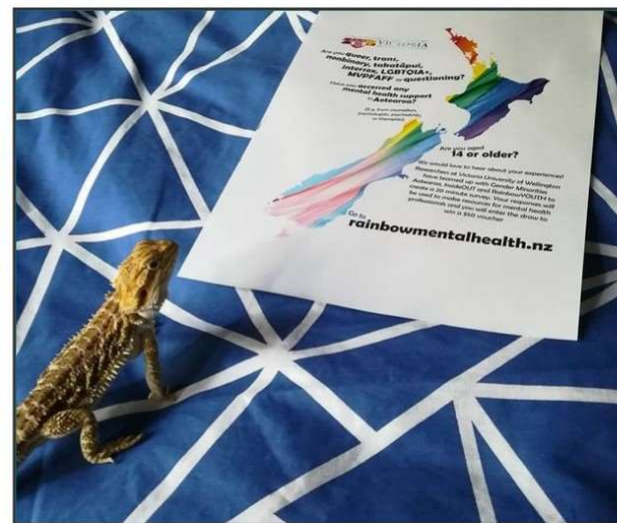
Whenever I come out to someone I feel like I'm giving away a piece of myself, and sometimes I'm happy to do it and I trust them with that, but **sometimes it feels like someone's just taken something from me**. It's mine and it's so personal and integral to who I am and how I experience the world

Wallis, nonbinary/genderqueer, gay, late teens

# Lack of knowledge

I think our linguistic choices are crucial, particularly as minorities. That's kind of how we relate to the world, by choosing certain words to describe us, our behaviours, our histories. I think it's really important to honour pronouns and names (...) if I call myself transgender don't call me a transsexual. **I think our word choices are deliberate and I don't like seeing other people mess with those**

Martin, trans man, queer, mid twenties



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# 52%

Of participants found mental health professionals “mostly helpful” or  
“extremely helpful” overall

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# 29%

Of participants found mental health professionals “mostly unhelpful” or  
“extremely unhelpful” overall

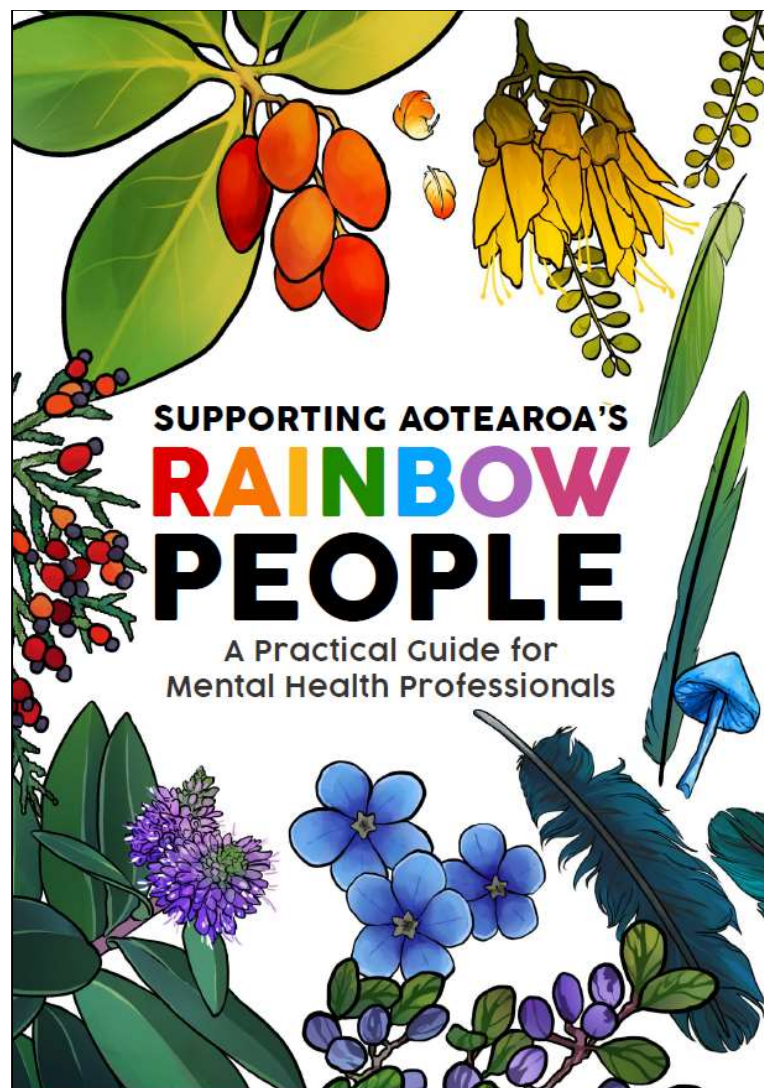
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# 47 weeks

Average waiting time between participants first requesting and receiving gender-affirming hormone therapy

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**Kia ora, nau mai, haere mai,** welcome to our resource on supporting rainbow people in Aotearoa's mental health settings!

#### **Who is this guide for?**

This guide is for anyone who provides mental health support in Aotearoa, including (but not limited to) counsellors, psychologists, psychiatrists, psychotherapists, tohunga (Māori healers), social workers, mental health nurses, and GPs. It will also be helpful for youth workers, group facilitators, and peer supporters.

#### **Why do you need this guide?**

Wherever you work in mental health, you work with rainbow people. Rainbow people in New Zealand face a range of complex issues, and mental health professionals don't always receive specific training about their needs and experiences. You already have the skills to provide great support – this guide is designed to give you information to build on and strengthen those skills.

#### **Who developed this guide?**

All the information you'll find here is based on findings from the Rainbow Mental Health Support Experiences Study and the Out Loud Aotearoa Project. Together, these projects involved interviews and surveys with, and submissions from, more than 1600 rainbow people in Aotearoa. To create this resource, researchers from Victoria University of Wellington's Youth Wellbeing Study teamed up with RainbowYOUTH, InsideOUT, and Gender Minorities Aotearoa. We also refer to other research studies throughout the guide, as cited on pages 52 and 53.

#### **Ngā mihi**

E hara taku toa i te toa takitahi, engari he toa takitini. We want to give our sincere thanks to everyone who took part in the research that made this resource possible, and to everyone who gave us feedback to improve the resource. Ngā mihi aroha ki a koutou.

Resource design and illustration by Bo Moore (bomoore.net).

Throughout this guide, we'll share quotes from people in the rainbow community. We will use different birds to do this instead of using real names.

We use the umbrella terms 'rainbow people' and 'sex, sexuality, and gender diverse people' throughout this guide. You might have heard different terms for this group, like LGBT or LGBTQIA+. We aim to be as inclusive as possible with our use of language but acknowledge that the terms we use don't work for everyone.







# Background

## Terminology

Understanding core concepts around biological sex, sexual orientation, and gender is central to supporting rainbow people. We don't define every important term here, but we do provide a few basic definitions to help with reading this resource.

To find out more about language and terminology, flick to page 52 to find links to regularly updated glossaries of important terms.

### Sexual Orientation

In its most simple definition, sexual orientation refers to who a person is attracted to (physically, romantically, emotionally, and spiritually). Knowing someone's sexual orientation doesn't mean you know everything about their attractions and behaviours – everyone is different.


It can be helpful to think of sexual orientation as being on a continuum. Some people's sexual orientation stays the same throughout their lives, while for others it may change and go back and forth along the continuum. Some people don't experience any sexual and/or romantic attraction, so might not place themselves on this continuum at all (we talk more about this further on in the resource).



## Asking About Identity

There are many different ways that mental health professionals can challenge the societal silence about sex, sexuality, and gender. Perhaps the most obvious way is to ask clients how they identify during an assessment, or the 'get to know you' part of the session.

Asking about sex, sexual orientation, and gender is a contentious issue. For some clients, it shows that their mental health professional hasn't assumed their identity, and creates a space for them to talk about identity. For others, being asked about how they identify in a mental health setting can feel confronting.



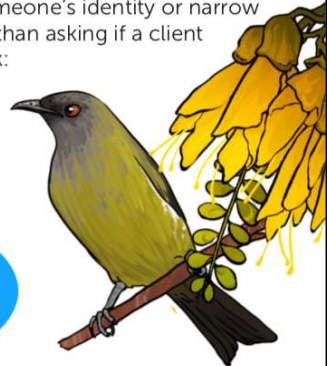
"Whenever I come out to someone I feel like I'm giving away a piece of myself, and sometimes I'm happy to do it and I trust them with that, but sometimes it feels like someone's just taken something from me. It's mine and it's so personal and integral to who I am and how I experience the world."

An alternative to directly asking about identity is to bring up sex, sexuality, and gender as a potential topic the client might want to talk about, without pressure to do so at a particular time. For example, you could say, 'Is sex, sexuality, or gender something you want to talk about here?'

## Creating a Supportive Therapeutic Space

### Expansive Language

One of the easiest and most helpful things we can do to signal to clients that we are rainbow friendly is using expansive language. Expansive language refers to any language that is deliberately open or vague so as to not assume someone's identity or narrow their experiences. For example, rather than asking if a client has a boyfriend or girlfriend we can ask:



Do you have a partner, or partners?

Can you tell me about the important relationships in your life?

Using expansive language means referring to anyone using they/them pronouns (known as gender-neutral pronouns) or a person's name until we hear more about them or learn the pronouns they prefer.

### Maintaining Privacy

When talking to rainbow clients about their names and pronouns, be sure to check in about whether they have a preferred way of being publicly contacted or addressed, for example when being called in the waiting room or sent any official communications. You should also ask what name and pronouns clients use around their family/whānau, at school or work, and in other important areas of life.



## Strengths and Resilience

A lot of conversations about rainbow people in society, research, and resources like this are focused entirely on negative elements, like stigma, discrimination, and health disparities. While these are important topics, we don't often acknowledge the strengths and resilience of sex, sexuality, and gender diverse people.

We ended our research study with a question about what is amazing about being rainbow, and we want to leave you with a few of the responses we got. When supporting rainbow clients, we need to remember the great stuff too!



"It's who I am. I wouldn't want to be any other way. The community is so beautiful and caring and diverse and strong."

"The expanded worldview it gives you, the empathy and understanding for other human beings, the true joy that comes out of knowing a certain kind of pain and sharing it with others, I wouldn't give that up ever."

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"The best thing about me! A source of pride, solidarity and love."

"Being part of a generally amazingly empathetic group of people who challenge so much of what is wrong in the world."



"Queer values of community, expression and diversity. We have a wonderful shared history of bright ideas and incredible people!"

"The people I've met in the community are my family! They are supportive, kind, and funny. They're resilient and brave."

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To find out more about  
supporting rainbow people, visit  
[rainbowmentalhealth.nz](https://rainbowmentalhealth.nz)



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Thanks for listening!  
Any questions?



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osf.io/dtxs6

Read the resource:  
**rainbowmentalhealth.nz**