

The Truth About Counseling – Dan Hitz

This newsletter is based on a workshop Dan Hitz and Jim Katsoudas presented at Restored Hope Network's HOPE 2022 conference. Both Dan and Jim are licensed mental health counselors. The goal of this newsletter is to provide a clear understanding of what licensed therapy and pastoral care for unwanted same-sex attraction or gender confusion looks like, compared to the public narrative of "conversion therapy". A future article will examine the validity of "change allowing therapy".



What do you think about when you hear the phrase "conversion therapy"? Popular culture would have you believe that it involves coercive behavior towards someone struggling with LGBTQ issues in an effort to manipulatively convert them from gay to straight. Add to that electric shock, nausea inducing drugs, and worse... Now you get the general public's opinion of what happens when someone receives counseling for unwanted same-sex attraction or gender confusion. Sadly, gay-advocates have created the term "conversion therapy" to demonize any "change allowing therapy" whether it is from a licensed therapist, a

pastoral care giver, or a compassionate peer support group. "Conversion therapy" is a straw man argument designed to spread angst among the unchurched population who doesn't want to be converted through some type of religious crusade. It slanders and overly simplifies what godly caregivers do by implying that we forcefully try to "pray the gay away". That's not what we do.

What about the argument, "Once gay, always gay?" We'll look more in-depth at the current peer reviewed scientific research in a future newsletter. There is ample evidence showing the fluidity of sexual attraction¹ and that change allowing therapy actually works². There is also plenty of evidence showing that even those who engaged in therapy but didn't experience a significant change in their orientation reported decreased depression and decreased suicidal behavior after therapy³.

For today, let's take a look at what the Bible says about transformation. The Bible offers clear proof that transformation is possible. 1 Corinthians 6:9-11 [NLT] reads:

⁹ Don't you realize that those who do wrong will not inherit the Kingdom of God? Don't fool yourselves. Those who indulge in sexual sin, or who worship idols, or commit adultery, or are male prostitutes, or practice homosexuality, ¹⁰ or are thieves, or greedy people, or drunkards, or are abusive, or cheat people—none of these will inherit the Kingdom of God. ¹¹ Some of you were once like that. But you were cleansed; you were made holy; you were made right with God by calling on the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.

This is irrefutable proof that homosexuality is just one of many behaviors that God identifies as sin and calls us to repent of. When we repent, He makes us right with Him. He cleanses us and makes us holy. That doesn't mean that we won't ever struggle with those temptations again. Jesus, Himself, was tempted. It doesn't even mean that we won't ever fall again. It does mean that we can repent of homosexuality, be made righteous in Christ, and begin the PROCESS of transformation. But what happens if we do sin again in our process of transformation? 1 John 2:1-2 [NIV] reads:

¹My dear children, I write this to you so that you will not sin. But if anybody does sin, we have an advocate with the Father—Jesus Christ, the Righteous One. ² He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world.

Receiving God's provision of forgiveness for our sin doesn't mean that we can continue willfully in our sin just because of his grace. As the Apostle Paul writes in Romans 6:1-2 [NLT] asking, "Well then, should we keep on sinning so that God can show us more and more of his wonderful grace?" His response was simple. "Of course not!" True grace shows us that God has mercy on us in our transformation process and works in our hearts to change our desires. Scripture has many examples of heroes of faith falling into sin and repenting⁴. As repentant followers of God, they never celebrated their sin. They certainly never took pride in their sin.

What about the "born this way" argument? Scripture makes it clear that we are all born dead in trespasses and sin and need to be born again.⁶ The truth is, no scientists have ever been able to prove a genetic cause to homosexuality. Even the American Psychiatric Association admits they do not know what causes homosexuality. In their document, *Answers to Your Questions: For a Better Understanding of Sexual Orientation and Homosexuality*⁵, they write:

There is no consensus among scientists about the exact reasons that an individual develops a heterosexual, bisexual, gay, or lesbian orientation. Although much research has examined the possible genetic, hormonal, developmental, social, and cultural influences on sexual orientation, no findings have emerged that permit scientists to conclude that sexual orientation is determined by any particular factor or factors. Many think that nature and nurture both play complex roles; most people experience little or no sense of choice about their sexual orientation.

What exactly is "change allowing therapy"? Such therapy or pastoral care may also be called "sexual orientation change efforts" or "sexual orientation and gender identity change efforts". It should also be noted that there are both faith centered caregivers and secular caregivers who are skilled in helping men and women overcome unwanted LGBTQ desires. Efforts to overcome unwanted same-sex attraction or gender confusion may include simply talking to someone who understands the struggle. In addition to talking, the caregiver may use Christian disciplines like prayer, Bible study, discipleship, and mentoring. There are many wonderful resources from men and women who are themselves overcomers and share many practical insights into the transformation process. The caregiver may teach the overcomer about boundaries, accountability, triggers, and coping skills. The caregiver may also help the client explore childhood trauma and life experiences that are contributing to the overcomer's unwanted same-sex attraction or gender confusion. For Christian caregivers, the most important aspect of the process will be to help the overcomer understand and live according to his true identity in Christ. Working with the caregiver is just one part of the transformation or recovery process. The overcomer can use many different resources to better understand himself, learn to manage temptation, and begin to practice healthier thought patterns and behaviors.

Pastoral caregiving and peer support may take place in more informal settings, while professional therapists will follow more formal, therapeutic guidelines. All compassionate care must follow "the client's right to self-determination", meaning that the client or ministry recipient is the one to set the goals for the care received. Change allowing caregivers are happy to work with anyone desiring to overcome LGBTQ issues. If someone wishes to embrace her LGBTQ desires, ethical therapists won't try to coerce her to change. God, Himself, won't violate our free will. In such a case, the caregiver would inform the client that it would violate the caregiver's personal convictions to help her embrace LGBTQ desires and refer her to a caregiver who offers "affirming therapy", or therapy that helps one embrace LGBTQ desires.

While the person receiving the care should be the one to set the goals for the care that he receives, some goals are helpful and some are not. This article will explore some of these goals from a Christian perspective. Many of these goals are also applicable to individuals who do not profess a faith in Christ, although the language and perspective may need to be modified to fit the worldview and vocabulary of

the specific individual. Anyone receiving therapy will be more successful in their recovery if they have a set of clearly defined, appropriate goals. Of course, all compassionate care will include the exploration of coping skills, boundaries, accountability, social interaction, and life principles that help us resist temptation and experience transformation. While these are important ingredients in recovery, the most important work occurs deep in the heart.

The primary goal should be to live our lives surrendered to the Lordship of Jesus Christ and living according to our true identity in him. The primary goal should NOT be the total elimination of same sex attraction or gender confusion. This is true whether we experience a significant shift in our attractions or not. If our focus is on the elimination of all temptations, we will continually be frustrated. True inner peace comes from living one's life surrendered to Jesus Christ, and receiving in him the love, strength and transformation that empowers us to live in authentic relationship with him. As we live for him, we become more like him. Jesus doesn't take away temptation, he gives us the power to resist temptation. Jesus wasn't defined by his temptations. Neither are we. We are defined by the Heavenly Father as cherished sons and daughters. We each have own unique set of strengths and weaknesses. In our submitted weakness, we are made strong in Christ (2 Corinthians 12:6-10).

Another healthy goal is the exploration of life experiences, unresolved trauma, and perceptions that may be contributing to unwanted same-sex attractions. We are a product of our perceptions and responses to our life experiences. Even though we may not be consciously aware of how these things have influenced our same-sex attraction or gender confusion, we live out those influences every day. They create behavior patterns, mindsets, and habits. Sexual brokenness and emotional challenges are the fruit of deeper emotional wounds in our heart. Understanding the root issues contributing to our unhealthy habits and mindsets can help us develop healthier thought patterns, coping skills, and life choices.

An extensive list of the benefits of change allowing therapy is beyond the scope of this newsletter, but here are some of the most common. Change allowing therapy speaks truth to the false narrative that one is trapped in homosexuality, lesbianism, or a transgender identity. Change allowing therapy can help the individual align his sexuality with his faith. This brings a deeper understanding of one's identity in Christ. He becomes better equipped to navigate through life's challenges in fellowship with Christ and other believers. Exploring negative life experiences and perceptions contributing to unwanted same-sex attraction and gender confusion leads to resolution of inner conflict. Overcomers experience decreased depression, anxiety, shame, and reduced suicidal thoughts and behavior. Change allowing therapy can help strugglers who are engaging in dangerous, high risk sexual behavior avoid doing so. Change allowing therapy enhances the overcomer's spiritual, social, physical, mental, and emotional wellbeing.

It is important to address some realistic expectations for anyone experiencing therapy of any type, and especially for those receiving therapy for unwanted same-sex attraction or gender confusion. Therapy to overcome any longstanding challenge and brokenness is hard work. Staying in our challenges and brokenness is hard work. True change happens when the pain of staying the same is greater than the pain of change, and we become motivated to do the hard work of recovery. This is a process. The overcomer will not experience full victory a week from Tuesday. She will need help and encouragement to celebrate the small victories and recover from the setbacks that will occur on a long journey. This is where the church, discipleship, and bearing one another's burdens comes in. The overcomer is surrendering a lot. Although sinful and broken, the LGBTQ community has also been a source of comfort, strength, and support. The overcomer will need the help of safe, trusted others in the Body of Christ who can love and support her as she yields that former way of life to the Lord.

It's not realistic to expect that if we are fully engaged in recovery for our same-sex attraction, God will surely bring us a spouse of the opposite sex. They are two separate issues. Unfortunately, many have

used marriage as a litmus test for victory. Marriage is very complicated. Not everyone is called to marriage. This includes those recovering from unwanted same-sex attraction and gender confusion, as well as those who have never struggled with their sexuality. Marriage is complicated. It doesn't cure sexual or emotional brokenness. If marriage is one of your recovery goals, or a demand you place upon God, you are setting yourself up for disappointment. I know many overcomers who are married, myself included. I also know many overcomers who are single and content. They are open to marriage if the Lord should ever bring the right person along, but it isn't a demand. Married or not, the important thing is to place all of our emotional needs and desires in God's hands and learn to receive our fulfillment from him. Along the way, he will help us learn to interact with others in the Body of Christ whom he can flow through to bless us and challenge us as we walk with him.

Whenever a new client comes into my office, I want to offer him realistic expectations. I explain that I still have some residual same-sex attractions, but that they are a fraction of what they used to be. They have gone from a place where they were debilitating, to a place where they are under my feet through the power of Jesus Christ. I have to keep my foot firmly planted and use the tools God has given me for victory. I practice accountability and boundaries. I continue to receive personal prayer ministry regularly. I explain the continuum of change. Some people have experienced a complete shift in their attractions and are no longer attracted to the same sex. Others have experienced little change in their attractions, but are continuing to yield those attractions to the cross. The reality is that most of us as overcomers are living in the middle of that continuum. We've experienced a shift in our attractions, but we still have to cope with some level of unwanted same-sex attraction. We are all a work on progress.

Temptations will still happen. The good news is that temptations can be yielded to Christ and used as an opportunity for deeper healing. (See the newsletter article "Praying Beyond the Temptations" at <https://recmin.org/newsletter-archives>.) Jesus was tempted while on this earth (Matthew 4:1-11). Luke 4:13 [NIV] reads, "When the devil had finished all this tempting, he left him [Jesus] for a more opportune time." One day this Scripture jumped off the page, and I realized that if Jesus had a more opportune – more vulnerable – time to be tempted, we surely will too. This truth helped set my heart at ease. Temptations are not sin. It's what we do with them that matters. Temptations don't define us! Jesus defines us!

Wherever we are along our journey, we can live a more fulfilled life with Jesus than we can live with sin. In Christ, we can grow in the fruits of the Spirit listed in Galatians 5:22-23a [NIV], "love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control." If you're made it to the end of this article, you processed a lot of information. You may still have many questions about change allowing therapy. You may be wondering how you or someone you love can begin a healing journey. You may be wondering if you are ready to begin the journey, or if there is anyone who can help. We at Reconciliation Ministries are here to help. Yes, the journey is challenging, but the godly rewards along the way are amazing. You will learn more about yourself and the love the Heavenly Father has for you than you can ever imagine. The journey is worth it! For more information, call us at 586.739.5114, or visit us online at www.recmin.org. There is hope and healing in Jesus Christ.

¹ Diamond, Dr. Lisa, *Sexual Fluidity: Understanding Women's Love and Desire*. Harvard University Press. 2008.

² <https://www.journalofhumansexuality.com/journals>

³ Nicolosi, J., Byrd, A.D., and Potts, R.W. (2000) Retrospective self-reports of changes in homosexual orientation: A consumer survey of conversion therapy clients. *Psychological Reports*, 86, 1071-1088.

⁴ Abraham, Isaac, David, Peter – add Scripture references

⁵ American Psychological Association. *Answers to Your Questions: For a Better Understanding of Sexual Orientation and Homosexuality*. Washington, DC. 2008. Retrieved from <https://www.apa.org/topics/lgbtq/orientation> on 5/30/2022.

⁶ John 3:1-21; Ephesians 2:1-5