

Working with Members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints Who Struggle with Unwanted Same-Sex Attractions and Behaviors

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Members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (commonly known as Mormons or Latter-day Saints) believe in the tenants of most other Christian congregations, including the basic principles as expressed in the Bible along with other unique scriptures and prophetic revelations. They believe God exists, He is aware of them and their trials, and He will support them in their desire to live in concert with their life-

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encompassing gospel plan of salvation. Members of the LDS Church believe they lived in a premortal existence, as gendered spirit children of heavenly parents. However, it is generally difficult for a member of the Church to share their personal feelings and/or deeply held values, their perceived sexual attractions, or gender identity issues. This article provides the clinically trained therapist with sufficient basic information regarding their LDS client's believed eternal identity, cultural environment, and worldview, to enable them to initiate a therapeutic alliance and maintain a foundation of hope for the future.

Keywords: Unwanted same-sex attraction, Church of Jesus Christ, psychotherapy, premortal existence

When presented with the opportunity to work with a new client, the therapist is responsible from the very first meeting for building rapport with him or her, through professional empathic listening, caring, and warmth. The quality of this connection between therapist and client is one of the most consistent predictors of successful treatment. When the relationship is a good fit and the client feels he or she can trust the therapist to handle their presented mental health issues with care and without prejudice, therapy can prove to be a solid foundation upon which the client can risk sharing fears and desires, as well as hopes for the future.

This process of trust-building and the resulting therapeutic connection begins with the initial intake and assessment conversation as the therapist demonstrates their respect and concern by listening intently and asking relevant open-ended questions regarding the client's background, values, and concerns. During this detailed and professional exploration of the issues of concern for the client, both the client and the therapist begin to develop an awareness of the nature of the presenting problem and the cultural individual and family environment from which it stems.

Critical to the skilled initial assessment process, as aptly posed by Brammer et al. (1989) is the attempt to answer several key questions:

What are the client's presenting problems? How do these problems fit into a comprehensive picture of client functioning? How does the client's

unique history influence his or her experience of and manner of dealing with the problem? Does the client's problem have a function in the larger systemic context? What is the therapist's experience of the client and his or her interpersonal style?

In pursuit of these questions, effective clinicians go beyond their client's presenting concerns, or reason for referral, as they evaluate background issues pertaining to work, school, or other major life roles such as social and personal-emotional adjustment, all the while observing the in-session non-verbal responses of their clients. Clinicians examine developmental and family history, including current and past family and parental relationships, religious and faith beliefs, and previous peer and social experiences. The therapist also enquires about medical and psychiatric conditions, including possible substance abuse and any attempted suicidal ideation, and they may also collect and review formal psychological assessment data. This lengthy case conceptualization process supports the counselor's ongoing and deepening understanding of the client's needs and challenges and is therapeutic in its ability to nurture the counseling relationship between the client and counselor (Whilston, 2009).

Because a client's ability to connect with their therapist often rests upon the client's ability to sense the therapist's unconditional positive regard, some clients will request to work with a therapist who shares similar life experience or comes from a similar culture or

background. Other clients will say they don't care about the race, culture, gender, or background of their therapist, as long as he or she is competent to help clients deal with their presenting mental health issues. Still other clients may come from a background, or live in locations, where finding a therapist with a similar cultural history is almost impossible. However, despite a client's initial beliefs regarding with whom they, as a new presenting client, can share the intimate personal details of their mental health status, the therapeutic process will ultimately rest upon the therapist's ability to understand, respect, and appreciate their client's background and closely held values. In essence, this intake process gives the therapist a view of their client's belief about what is important in life.

Critical to the therapist's ability to understand and appreciate the reality of their client's current situation is the therapist's ability to compare and contrast what their client perceives to be the case, with the therapist's perceptions of their client's true and lived reality. This is especially important when any client who self-identifies as a member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (also known as the "Mormon" or the Latter-Day Saint Church) seeks assistance through counseling, to remediate or resolve a conflict between the their unwanted same-sex attractions or perceived gender dysphoria. Because of the deep stress and ego dystonic social-emotional conflict involved in coping with life in a very liberal society and, at the same time, being reared from childhood in a very conservative Church culture, troubled members of the LDS Church who present for counseling are often unaware of the depth of their conflicting sexual feelings and attractions. The LDS client will either believe they can process their presenting emotional difficulties quickly and/or superficially or will believe "there is very little any therapist

can do" to help them remediate their emotional struggle and pain, but "at least they have to give 'therapy' a try." Whatever the presenting attitude, the LDS client will not understand the potential difficulty of communicating with a therapist when confronted with the need to verbalize and to discuss very intense and unwanted sexual feelings, attractions, and/or compulsions.

For an LDS client, any meaningful communication with a therapist can only occur within the understanding of their cultural environment and the language of their spiritual lives and believed eternal identities. This does not mean the LDS client will need to discuss their personal concerns only with a member of the Church, but it does mean that a non-Latter-day Saint professional counselor must be aware of the LDS client's need to be accepted and heard by someone who respects "who the client is," "where he or she wants to go in this life," and "where the client expects (or hopes) to go" after this life. Ultimately, the client will need to connect with the unconditional positive regard of the therapist and trust they will be understood because of (or despite) their inculcated values and beliefs.

As a foundation, a therapist can rightly assume that given the name of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, its members will have a basic acceptance of Christian values and a strong belief in the Bible, as is the case with faithful Roman Catholic or Evangelical Christian clients, as reported in two articles of the previous volume of this journal, by Dr. Philip M. Sutton, "Serving Persons with (Unwanted) Same-Sex Attraction and Behavior (SSA) from the Roman Catholic Tradition" (Sutton, 2019) and Drs. Julie H. Hamilton and Philip J. Henry, "Working with Evangelical Christian Clients Who Have Unwanted Same-Sex Attractions" (Hamilton & Henry, 2019).

In addition to many shared doctrinal beliefs concerning sex and gender, a therapist

or counselor should be aware of unique Latter-day Saint theological perspectives that constitute a major part of their client's unique worldview. These religious concepts are integral to the understanding a Latter-day Saint has regarding the essential purpose of mortal life and his or her future in eternity. The following quotation from Elder Dallin H. Oaks, a member of the current First Presidency of the Church, will frame three of these doctrinal beliefs:

The purpose of mortal life and the mission of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is to prepare the sons and daughters of God for their destiny—to become like our heavenly parents.

Our eternal destiny—exaltation in the celestial kingdom—is made possible only through the atonement of Jesus Christ (through which we became and can remain “innocent before God” (D&C 93:38³) and is only available to a man and a woman who have entered into and been faithful to the covenants of an eternal marriage in a temple of God (D&C 131:1–4, D&C 132). . . .

Because Satan desires that “all men might be miserable like unto himself” (2 Nephi 2:27⁴, Abraham 3:25–26), his most strenuous efforts are directed at encouraging those choices and actions that will thwart God's plan for his children. He seeks to undermine the principle of individual accountability, to persuade us to misuse our sacred powers of

procreation, to discourage marriage and childbearing by worthy men and women, and to confuse what it means to be male or female. (Oaks, 1995)

Latter-day Saints Are Taught That There Is a Gendered Deity—A Father and a Mother in Heaven

Unique among Christian denominations, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints teaches that God the Eternal Father is an immortal, glorified, exalted physical Being, and that God the Father and His resurrected Son, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Ghost are three separate and distinct Beings, who are one in mind and purpose. “The Father has a body of flesh and bones as tangible as man's; the Son also; but the Holy Ghost has not a body of flesh and bones but is a personage of Spirit” (D&C 130:22; see also Luke 24:36–39).

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints teaches members (including very young children) that they have both a Father and a Mother in Heaven, in whose image they have been created, “as a human being—male or female—a spirit son or daughter of heavenly parents.” These members of the Church will likely believe that in a premortal existence they “knew and worshipped God as their Eternal Father and accepted His plan by which His children could obtain a physical body and gain earthly experience to progress toward perfection and ultimately realize their divine destiny as heirs of eternal life” (The Family: A Proclamation to the World, 1995⁵).

³ “D&C” is a citation to the *Doctrine and Covenants of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, a volume containing revelations given to Joseph Smith, the first prophet and President of the Church, and some additions by his successors. Latter-day Saints accept the Doctrine and Covenants as scripture alongside the Holy Bible and the Book of Mormon. The citation is to section number and verse.

⁴ This is a citation to the Book of Mormon: Another Testament of Jesus Christ.

⁵ From time to time, the General Authorities of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints issue statements of doctrinal clarification or direction regarding important gospel principles.

While there is considerable clarity regarding the role of our Father in Heaven (similar in many aspects to general Christian thought), there is limited specificity regarding the exact role and responsibilities of a Heavenly Mother, though the concept is a long held and cherished belief among Latter-day Saints (Paulsen & Pulido, 1920). Susa Young Gates, the daughter of Church President Brigham Young, and a prominent writer, periodical editor, women's right advocate, and leader in the Church, wrote in 1920 that Joseph Smith (the founder of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints) asserted the truth that "the divine Mother, [is] side by side with the divine Father" (Gates, 1920). Even earlier, in 1910, Elder Rudger Clawson, Church leader and editor of the Latter-day Saints *Millennial Star* publication wrote, "We honor woman when we acknowledge Godhood in her eternal Prototype" (Clawson, 1910).

Why is this understanding so important for therapists working with a Latter-day Saint client? For members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, this rather unique understanding of the nature of God, their relationship to Deity, the importance of gender, and their existence as literal spirit children of heavenly parents gives particular meaning to the significance of being male or female. Much of a Latter-day Saint's personal identity and understanding of their place in the world and in a future eternity may be tied to their believed place in this pre- to post-mortal family constellation. Their concept of gender identity and role and purpose of human sexuality may not really be very flexible for them. The therapist needs to be aware that asking a Latter-day Saint client to challenge some of his or her personal assumptions on sexuality and gender can elicit profound emotional vulnerability.

Latter-day Saints Are Taught They Existed as Gendered, Premortal Spirits— Male and Female

Among the many religions of the world, there is a wide diversity of opinion regarding when and how the soul or spirit of an individual enters the physical body. However, most Christian denominations accept the doctrine of "creationism." For example, the traditional philosophy of the Roman Catholic Church holds that the rational soul is created by God at the moment it is infused into the new organism.⁶ "Traducianism," on the other hand, is the belief that an individual's soul is derived from the souls of the individual's parents and enters the organism at the time of birth. Still other religions, or philosophical schools, assert their belief in "ex nihilo" creation, believing the soul of man was "created out of nothing" or was created from "eternal matter." However Latter-day Saint doctrine specifically rejects creationism, traducianism, and ex nihilo creation. In contrast, Latter-day Saints believe in the "premortal existence" of the souls of man.

Members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints are taught their gendered spirits existed long before they came to earth to occupy mortal bodies (in fact, long before the earth was created). According to this unique Latter-day Saint doctrine, every individual first existed as an intelligence. Then, as Church leader Melvin J. Ballard taught, "In due time that intelligence was given a spirit body, becoming the spirit child of God the Eternal Father and his beloved companion, the Mother in Heaven. This spirit, inhabited by the singular, eternal intelligence, took the form of its creators and is in their image" (Ballard, 1949).

⁶ *Dogma*, Dis seminary, August 2005, According to the ruling opinion of Catholic Theologians the human

soul is not received by parental propagation (traducianism), but by immediate divine creation (creationism).

In 1995, the First Presidency of the Church released “The Family: A Proclamation to the World,” which elaborated on this doctrine of a pre-mortal spirit existence and added an additional clarification on the nature of gender: “All human beings—male and female—are created in the image of God. Each is a beloved spirit son or daughter of heavenly parents, and, as such, each has a divine nature and destiny. Gender is an essential characteristic of individual premortal, mortal, and eternal identity and purpose” (The Family Proclamation, 1995).

Thus, Latter-day Saints teach that we all had binary gendered spirits before coming to earth, and that this is part of our eternal identity. A man’s or a woman’s spirit was not created by the child’s parents upon conception, or at the moment of physical birth into this world and, thus, is not subject to the potential flaws of the mortal body’s physical delivery system.

Latter-day Saints Are Taught That Sexuality Is Intended for Married, Male and Female Individuals Who Hope to Create Eternal Families

Most therapists are aware that The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints continues to oppose, and declines to recognize, same-sex unions as “marriages,” in the true (and eternal) sense of the word. While an elaboration on that specific policy is not warranted in this article, an understanding of the unique Later-day perspective on the nature of sexuality, procreation, marriage, and families is important.

In simple terms, Latter-day Saints believe that we came to earth to receive a mortal body to house our spirits. These bodies have many purposes, but the most important objective is to participate in a family, make sacred

promises to God, and create (when possible) a family of their own. The procreative process is sacred and reserved for marriage. Ideally, a man and woman have children and then those children are sealed to them—generation after generation—becoming an extended, eternal family. It would be difficult to overstate how thoroughly this idea is embedded into every aspect of Church teaching and informs and provides the foundation for the Latter-day Saint worldview.

For members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, marriages and families don’t necessarily end at death⁷ (Gardner, 1980).

We can picture ourselves home again with our Heavenly Parents in that wonderful place, not only as sons and daughters, but husbands and wives, fathers and mothers, grandfathers and grandmothers, grandsons and granddaughters, bound together forever in loving families. (Eyring, 1998)

Your client has been taught that family relationships, which are sealed under divinely delegated authority in a Church temple, and in which the members are faithful to the covenants made there, will extend beyond the grave.

Thus, in the therapeutic process, avoid encouraging a member of the Church of Jesus Christ to move into an emotionally closer, intimate, sexual relationship, or to try cohabitation with, or to enter into a formal marriage with a same-sex partner. This only exacerbates the client’s situation and deepens the client’s sense of guilt, especially until they have tried other means to satisfy their desires for validation. Weekly same-sex therapy groups can help your client meet this

⁷ Latter-day Saint children sing about how families can be together forever.

need, as well as the client's attendance, with other same-sex friends, at public athletic events. Also helpful in deepening same-sex friendships are client's participation in such physical activities as biking with friends, golf, mountain climbing, or working with community volunteer projects, such as Habitat for Humanity, local food kitchens, medical outreach events, political gatherings, or other charitable activities.

This type of service to others, is a large part of the LDS culture and provides great opportunity for clients, who have been reared in the Church, to feel comfortable in reaching out to others in need and even in gathering a group of friends to tackle most any kind of project. This process, of serving, assisting, and learning from others in need, also provides a healthy diversion from too much self-concern or falling victim to detrimental, unhelpful feelings of personal loss and grief. Such service projects are all around us and can be easily vetted by checking with local public, religious, or private organizations.

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints sponsors recreational group activities for individuals of any age (i.e. children's play groups, teenage bike and hiking trips, young adult soccer or spelunking or dance activities, middle-age home repair or fishing or sailing trips, and old-age gardening and quilting), and all projects are open to members of any other social or religious groups.

Your LDS client will certainly understand that, according to Church doctrine and teachings, sex has no truly meaningful purpose or place in their life unless they are legally married to an individual of the opposite sex. Of course, Latter-day Saints and their Church authorities understand that sex does, and should occur, between married men and women even without the possibility of procreation. Latter-

day Saint doctrine takes a very healthy and positive view of sexual intimacy within marriage. Further, Church leaders, place a high priority on protecting a mother's health and other possible physical and emotional needs of married couples, as those couples consider whether to take steps to prevent conception.

Latter-day Saints Believe Sexual Thoughts and Behaviors and Human Hearts Can Be Changed, through Their Efforts and with the Help of the Lord

Members of the Church believe "all mankind [including themselves] may be saved" by obedience to the laws and ordinances of the Gospel" (Smith, 1842)⁸. However, those who struggle with unwanted same-sex attractions or gender dysphoria may be worried they have lost their opportunity to "ultimately realize their divine destiny, as heirs of eternal life," through "the divine plan of happiness (which) enables family relationships to be perpetrated beyond the grave," (Mouritsen, 1947; The Family Proclamation, 1995) all because of their inability to be sexually attracted to members of the opposite sex.

Because Latter-day Saint clients may be afraid, or may have become convinced, there is no hope of their ever being able to have a marriage and family, it is important they process this particular concept in light of their understanding of the basic principles of their Church. Your Latter-day Saint client has been taught from childhood (or since joining the Church) to believe that because of the unfathomable love of our Savior and heavenly parents, any individual who aspires to achieve whatever status they hope for in eternity, and who is willing to follow the path to get there, will be granted that status, despite whatever physical, emotional, or

⁸ This is a quotation from Article 3, of thirteen basic beliefs held by the Church of Jesus Christ, now

known as the "Articles of Faith," which were written by Joseph Smith, in response to the request from John Wentworth of the *Chicago Democrat*.

spiritual challenges they face, no matter how long it takes, or how many times they may slip off the path during the process.

We, also, have learned as professional therapists, and need to reflect to our clients, the truth that unwanted same-sex attraction and behaviors are not “innate and immutable.” Research has demonstrated that whatever biological factors or conditions might present in a client’s thoughts, desires, or compulsions, they are “predisposing” not “predetermining” (Byrd, 2009).

As a result, it is important that, as part of our process of forming a strong therapeutic alliance with a Latter-day Saint client, he (or she) should be encouraged to share with the therapist his (or her) understanding of his personal relationship with Deity and long-range hopes for an “eternal marriage and family.” Often it is helpful to ask a client to visualize himself or herself in the future, imagine “what” and “where” the client would like to be in two years or even ten years from the present time (whatever the client’s hopes may be) and agree to commit those scenarios to writing. Then ask your client to share them with you, as they are ready to do so. The positive visions and hopes clients list, as drawn from their thoughts and inculcated belief system, can then be used by the therapist (whatever the therapist’s preferred treatment modality), to strengthen the client’s ability to move forward in the therapeutic process.

Latter-day Saint clients need to be supported in their belief that “with God all things are possible” (Matt. 19:26) and “there is time, both in this life and in the life to come, during which changes in heart, behaviors, and even in interpersonal attractions, can be realized” (Holland,

2017).⁹ The Lord understands our trials, especially those faced by human beings struggling with unwanted sexual attractions and beliefs, and if we keep trying and truly repent, each time we slip off the path and do something contrary to divine commandment, He will forgive us, even daily, until we reach our goal (Robbins, 2018)¹⁰. This process of continual effort and progressive change, over time, is essential to achieving our eternal potential under God’s plan of salvation for His spirit children (Plan of Salvation, 1830). Further, it is critical that the client be encouraged to remember every opportunity and blessing under the plan of salvation is available to any and every individual, including the client personally (John 14:13) and not just to other people who may not face the same particular personal and family challenges as the client.

If for any reason, your client is completely unable to relate to the possible promise of “peace in this world, and eternal life in the world to come” that is the consequence of faithful living (D&C 59:23), or seems to be exhibiting any other signs of increasing and persistent depression, the client must be carefully monitored for possible self-harm activity and suicidal ideation. Assist him or her to discuss, reconsider and revise their immediate objectives, by lowering their level of expectations and possibly extending the length of time required to reach their selected goals. Help your client to step back from their original plan of action and craft a more conservative plan for the immediate future, with more concrete achievable steps to reach their goals. Further, if your LDS client is particularly emotionally vulnerable, such a

⁹ Elder Jeffrey R. Holland stated, “If we persevere, then somewhere in eternity our refinement will be finished and complete—which is the New Testament meaning of *perfection*.”

¹⁰ “To become like Him will require countless second chances in our day-to-day struggles with the natural man.” (Lynn G. Robbins)

plan might also include a suicide prevention contract signed by you both.

When you feel it may be appropriate, ask your client to share with you what the Church teaches about their life before they came to earth. You may get any number of responses from your client, but if the quality of your therapeutic relationship allows them to be fairly transparent, he or she will express their belief that they lived as a spirit with heavenly parents. The client may elaborate that he or she was one of the spirits, who decided to come to earth, each to gain a physical body and, thus, to experience very challenging problems just as those you are discussing in the course of therapy. Your client will understand that, though he or she lived a very long time in that premortal life, and assuredly discussed what life might be like on earth, with no real experience, there is no way they could have fully understood how difficult this life would actually be.

Given this much-expanded vision of his or her life process, and with an understanding of how far they have already come in the past, your LDS client will likely also express the belief that he or she is never really alone. Encourage your client to tell you about any feelings and ideas regarding which of their family members or friends (who have passed on) may be aware of their struggles and may, at times, be nearby to help them manage their trials and to allay their fears.

Many of the members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints have what is called a written and recorded patriarchal blessing, as given to them by a priesthood leader, to help them learn about who they are, their strengths, individual gifts, and the challenges they may face in this life. Though the client will not (and should not) share that document with you, because they hold it to be sacred, your client may share some of the positive encouragement and eternal promises it contains. You can ask your client what their blessing means to them and encourage him or

her to remember that the blessing is another bit of evidence of how much the Lord loves and attempts to support them during these difficult times.

During the balance of your work with your Latter-day Saint client, you will need to assist him or her, to continue to review his or her options, to work on self-management skills, to repent, and to forgive themselves, as often as needed, even “until seventy times seven” (Matt. 18:22) as he or she moves forward along the path to their goals. Whenever possible, review with your client how difficult this journey is for anyone, and that it takes time and a great deal of patience. Point out how the successes he or she has experienced along the way have been substantial and better than they had expected. Further, take time to help your client step back and review the progress he or she has made on their large view, the overall plan to acquire peace in this life, or review his or her progress toward an intermediate goal along that path, or whatever other accomplishment will leave them feeling their current struggles are not in vain and, most importantly, with hope for further progress in the future.

In summary, it is common practice for therapists, during their standard process of clinical counseling, to encourage clients to step out of their comfort zone and try something that may seem a little unsettling. For example, throughout that therapeutic process, we often will encourage a client who may see himself (or herself) as “shy” to make an effort to talk to someone they would like to meet or get to know better. For a client who desires to appear less “conventional” in their physical presentation, we might support his or her idea of trying a new hairstyle or a different wardrobe. Some therapists working with a client who expresses a desire to become more socially integrated with peers may support that client’s expressed desire to move in with another individual, to see if that will, as they hope, improve his or her ability

to establish closer social and emotional connections with others. However, understanding the difference between encouraging such new experiences and destabilizing what may be essential building blocks in your Latter-day Saint client's unique personal identity and security, such as we have discussed, will rest upon your knowledge and caring appreciation of the religious, social, and cultural context of that LDS client's life.

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