

Are You an LGBTQ-Friendly Massage Therapist?

This Clientele Needs Nurturance More Than Ever

By Amber Briggles, LMT

I HAVE BEEN a massage therapist for nearly 20 years, and a mother for 15. When my son came out to me as transgender nearly a decade ago, my love for him didn't change one bit—but I quickly realized that loving someone unconditionally and supporting them in the best way they needed aren't the same thing. I realized I had a steep learning curve ahead of me if I was going to provide the care, support and resources he needed to thrive and eventually become the quirky, talented, athletic, compassionate, sweet-natured young man he is today.

While his dad and I have provided a nurturing, affirming, supportive home for him, the rest of the world has not been as validating. In fact, most days it feels like the rest of the world has been actively hostile toward him and the LGBTQ community of which he is a part.

Challenges to the LGBTQ Community

Marriage equality was granted by the U.S. Supreme Court in 2015 and further cemented into law in 2022 when Congress passed the Respect for Marriage Act, but the rights of the LGBTQ community remain under fierce attack in state legislatures across the country today. As of March 2023, over 400 anti-LGBTQ bills—nearly double the number of bills as the year before—have been filed or adopted in states from Florida to Idaho, and nearly all points in between. By April 1, 24 of these bills had passed in 11 states, with many more bills still pending and likely to pass before elected officials adjourn for the year.

This legislation covers just about every aspect of life for LGBTQ people, especially transgender people. Bans on a transgender student's ability to join or compete in sports, bans on lifesaving gender-affirming



care for transgender minors, bans on books with LGBTQ characters, bans on a transgender individual's ability to access a public bathroom, even bans on such speech as using a transgender child's chosen name and pronouns in school, or talking about how some families have two moms or two dads, or nonbinary parents.

According to a recent Gallup poll, 7.2% of Americans identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or queer. That is millions of Americans whose lives and identities are under attack and who are understandably stressed, worried, anxious and afraid. When the daily headlines scream about the threats *against* the LGBTQ community (not the other way around, y'all), it doesn't take a genius to understand that those daily threats can cause a person to live on high alert, constantly looking over their shoulder for the next attack, be it legislative or physical. LGBTQ people are four times more likely to be victims of violent crime, according to the Williams Institute at the UCLA School of Law. That persistent worry and fear can

increase cortisol levels, thereby decreasing immunity, increasing heart disease and excessive weight gain or loss, interrupting sleep and causing numerous other physical and emotional imbalances.

Not to mention, it just sucks having to live your life in a state of constant vigilance. LGBTQ people deserve to relax once in a while too!

That's where we come in.

Create a Safe Space

When we consider that people right here in our own community are experiencing the emotional and physical distress of having to fight daily for their right to exist, it is more important than ever that we create safe spaces in our clinics and studios to welcome a diverse clientele, and that we focus on the rights and equal treatment of the LGBTQ community year 'round—not just during Pride Month in June.

As massage therapists, we are called to serve others from a place of compassion and healing. We are highly skilled when

it comes to reducing cortisol levels and getting people out of the fight/flight/freeze sympathetic nervous system and into the parasympathetic, rest-and-digest nervous system so their bodies can return to homeostasis. Additionally, using a transgender person's chosen name and pronouns in your clinic can improve their mental health by reducing symptoms of severe depression by 71%, according to a study from the University of Texas at Austin. In other words, what matters isn't just how you massage a body—it's how you treat the whole person.

I have been very fortunate in my career to be able to welcome so many transgender and nonbinary clients to my practice. I've worked hard for nearly a decade to explicitly express my support for the LGBTQ community. As a result, today we have dozens of queer clients we see regularly at Soma Massage Therapy, my studio in Denton, Texas.

One client, "B," told me recently how important this care is to not only her physical health, but her mental health as well. As B explained, "I'm on my feet all day at my job and I often have low-back pain as a result. I need to come in regularly for massage in order to keep my body in working condition, but as a queer trans woman, I don't always feel safe in such a vulnerable setting.

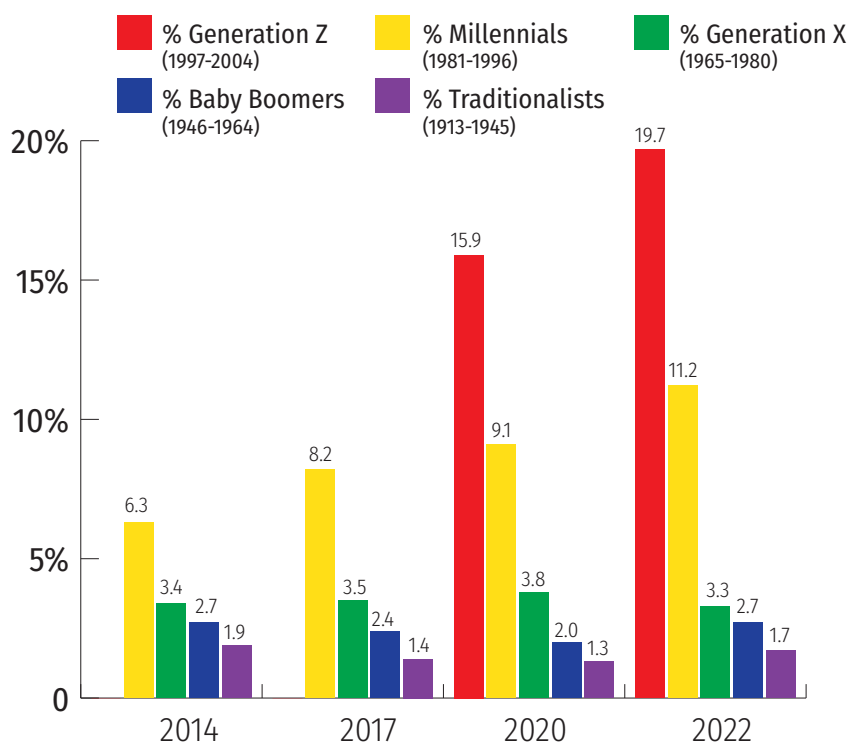
"I want someone to help me with my aches and pains, and I don't want to have to worry about my safety or dignity in the process," B continued. "Coming in regularly for my massages has helped me manage my low-back pain for sure, but I also find that I sleep better for several days afterward because I feel grounded again. I don't always know which spaces are going to be safe for me, but I always know that I'm safe at Soma."

(Excuse me while I cut these onions, y'all.)

Leaving your biases, prejudices and assumptions at the door is a great first step toward seeing transgender people as *people*, not as *parts*. Taking the time to listen to their massage goals, curating a session specifically for their needs that day, and approaching them with an open heart and an open mind is how we should

7.2 Percent of U.S. Adults Identify as LGBTQ

Share of American Adults Who Identify as LGBTQ, by Birth Year



Source: Gallup

be treating every client who walks through our doors.

Put another way, it doesn't matter if those tight hamstrings you're working on belong to a transgender athlete or a cisgender one, and we as massage therapists are called to address that client with the same level of professionalism and respect, regardless of their sexual orientation or gender identity.

Uncover Biases

We as massage therapists—and as human beings—are also called to uncover our own biases and discover resources for working through them. The best, most effective way to do this is to meet a transgender person. Meet *lots* of transgender people, actually.

- Offer chair massage at the next LGBTQ meetup or Pride event.
- Donate a gift certificate to an LGBTQ resource center that they can either gift to an overworked employee or auction off at their next fundraiser.

- Attend that fundraiser and listen to the amazing stories of the amazing people in the room: their resilience, tenacity, diversity and pride in who they are and all they offer to the world.

It's easy to let fear and misinformation cloud your understanding of who this community is and the people who are part of it, but once you truly get to know a transgender person up-close and personal, you are able to see them for who they are: a beautiful, miraculous person who is living their life unedited.


Be an LGBTQ-Friendly Massage Therapist

Given the hateful rhetoric, dangerous misinformation and all-out legislative assaults against the LGBTQ community today, we have a responsibility as massage therapists to be intentionally welcoming in our practices, ensuring anyone who seeks our care is treated with dignity, respect and kindness, regardless of their sexual orientation or gender identity.

Doing so benefits our clients physically

and emotionally during these trying and traumatic times when they need us most. **M**

Amber Briggie (she/they) is a massage therapist and owner of Soma Massage Therapy in Denton, Texas. She is also the mother of two, including a transgender teenager. She is the former national co-chair of the Human Rights Campaign's Parents for Transgender Equality Council, and her family was recently profiled in the Washington Post newspaper, in "Texas is home. The Briggie family and their trans child are fighting for it" (read here: <https://wapo.st/3Kmmwdr>). Her essay titled, "Help Make the World Healthier for LGBTQ People," was one of the articles in the August 2021 Diversity, Equity & Inclusion issue of *MASSAGE Magazine*, a first-place winner of a national 2022 Folio Eddies Award for editorial excellence.

 Read "Be an Ally to the LGBTQ Community—And Not Just During Pride Month [Guest Editorial]," by Amber Briggie, on massagemag.com.



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