

Coming Out to Families: Supporting Gay Men and Their Families



Training Manual for Social Workers



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Chapter 1 Introduction

1.1 Purpose and Scope

This manual¹ is designed to assist social workers and other professionals in supporting LGBTQ+ individuals² and their families in Hong Kong. More specifically, it provides the essential knowledge, skills, and strategies required to address the unique challenges faced by gay men and their family members. Gay men frequently encounter discrimination, stigmatization, and social exclusion, all of which significantly impact their mental health, interpersonal relationships, and overall well-being. This manual aims to equip social workers with practical tools to provide effective support, ultimately fostering a more inclusive and accepting society.

A critical aspect of supporting gay men is recognizing the **importance of family support**. Family acceptance is vital to the mental health and the quality of life of gay men. Social workers can help family members develop a deeper understanding of their gay relatives, thereby improving family dynamics and reducing conflict.

Furthermore, schools have a profound influence on the developmental experiences of gay men. This manual offers strategies for collaborating with schools to ensure that all students—regardless of their sexual orientation—can grow up in a safe and supportive environment.

In addition to focusing on the needs of gay men and their families, this manual stresses how important it is for social workers to develop a thorough understanding of LGBTQ+ issues. By raising awareness, reducing discrimination, and promoting acceptance, social workers can help build a more supportive and inclusive society.

1.2 Understanding the Needs of Gay Men and Their Families

To provide effective support, social workers must understand the specific challenges faced by gay men and their families. Key areas include:

- i. **Mental health:** Because of the stigma, discrimination, and family rejection many gay men experience, they face higher rates of depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation. Social workers play a key role in helping clients build resilience and supporting their overall mental health.
- ii. **Family acceptance and support:** Family support can significantly boost a gay individual's self-esteem and mental health. However, some families struggle to accept a gay family member, which can lead to conflict, rejection, or even homelessness.

¹ This manual is based on researches done by one of the authors, Professor Travis Kong, who has been researching different generations of gay men in Hong Kong for decades. It incorporates findings from his recent research on gay men and their families (funded by the Hong Kong Research Grants Council, Award No. 17606221).

Please note that this manual focuses primarily on the experiences of gay men rather than other sexual minority individuals. Therefore, the general service protocols established here are based on the experiences of gay men; specialized services for other specific sexual/gender minorities (e.g., lesbians, transgender individuals, etc.) may be further explored in future research.

Please also note that this English version is the translation from the Chinese version.

² LGBTQ+ refers to lesbians, gay men, bisexuals, transgender people, queer individuals, and other sexual/gender minorities. The local parlance for LGBTQ+ is *tongzhi*.

Social workers can assist families better understand and support their loved ones, strengthening those relationships over time.

- iii. **Cultural factors and sensitivity:** How families and communities view male homosexuality varies widely across Hong Kong, Mainland China, and other regions, shaped by local cultures, beliefs, and values. Some traditional **Chinese values, like filial piety**, can add extra pressure through social labelling, making acceptance harder. Social workers need to be attuned to these dynamics so they can offer support that is both respectful and effective

1.3 Getting Started with the Manual

This manual aims to build awareness among social workers and other professionals and to encourage dialogue around these topics. At its core, it strives to bring diversity, inclusion, and acceptance into the way support services are delivered.

- i. **Read:** Start by reading through the chapters to get familiar with core concepts, challenges, and strategies for supporting gay men and their families.
- ii. **Reflect:** Consider the section reflection questions designed to help you think through different scenarios and connect what you've read to your own practice.
- iii. **Discuss:** If you're learning in a group, discuss the reflection questions with colleagues. If you're studying on your own, take some time to organize and record your thoughts.
- iv. **Implement:** Think about how to apply this knowledge in real-life situations. Whether in the workplace, personal life, or the community, practice the principle of inclusion to create a kind and affirmative environment for everyone.

1.4 Discussion Questions

- i. What unique challenges do gay men and their families face in Hong Kong?
- ii. How can social workers make sure their approach is culturally sensitive and tailored to the needs of gay men and their families?
- iii. In your opinion, what matters most when building a support system that is inclusive of gay men?
- iv. How can social workers best support the mental health and emotional wellbeing of gay men in Hong Kong?
- v. Why is it important for social workers to have a strong understanding of the specific challenges faced by gay men and their families in Hong Kong?

Chapter 2 Understanding Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity

2.1 Key Terms and Concepts

To effectively support their clients, social workers need to be familiar with key terminology around sexual orientation and gender identity. Here are some core definitions:

- i. **Sexual orientation** describes who a person is consistently attracted to on an emotional, romantic, or sexual level. An individual may identify as:
 - a. **Homosexual (Gay/Lesbian):** Attracted to the same sex.
 - b. **Heterosexual (Straight):** Attracted to the opposite sex.
 - c. **Bisexual:** Attracted to both men and women.
- ii. **Gender identity** refers to a person's inner sense of their own gender, which may or may not align with the sex they were assigned at birth. A person may identify as male, female, or **non-binary** (meaning not exclusively male or female).
- iii. **Transgender** describes people whose gender identity differs from the sex they were assigned at birth. For example, someone assigned female at birth (AFAB) may identify as male. It is worth noting that not all transgender individuals choose to pursue medical steps such as hormonal therapy or surgery.
- iv. **Cisgender** describes people whose gender identity aligns with the sex they were assigned at birth. For example, someone assigned male at birth (AMAB) who identifies as a man is cisgender.
- v. **Coming out** refers to the process of sharing one's sexual orientation or gender identity with others. This can be a difficult and deeply personal process, and not everyone chooses to **come out** in every area of their life.
- vi. **Phobias and prejudice include:**
 - a. **Homophobia:** Fear, hatred, or discrimination targeting gay or lesbian people.
 - b. **Biphobia:** Fear, hatred, or discrimination targeting bisexual people.
 - c. **Transphobia:** Fear, hatred, or discrimination targeting transgender people.All of these forms of discrimination can lead to harassment, violence, or social exclusion.
- vii. **Heteronormativity** is the belief or assumption that heterosexuality is the default or "normal" standard. This assumption can lead to discrimination against the LGBTQ+ community and make it harder for society to embrace diversity.

2.2 Common Questions

Below are some common questions and arguments that people commonly raise about the LGBTQ+ community

Question	Argument/Perspective
Is homosexuality innate (nature) or learned (nurture)?	This question itself reveals a bias. We rarely ask the same of heterosexuality . Trying to find a “cause” for non-heterosexual orientations tends to reinforce stigma rather than advance understanding.
Can LGBTQ+ people change their orientation through therapy?	There is no scientific evidence that sexual orientation can be changed, or that it should be. Conversion therapy is harmful and has been widely condemned by mental health professionals.
Are LGBTQ+ people more prone to mental health issues because of who they are?	The higher rates of mental health challenges among LGBTQ+ people are driven by discrimination, rejection, and social stigma , not by their identity itself.

2.3 Diversity and Intersectionality within the Community

The LGBTQ+ community is incredibly diverse, and no two people's experiences are the same. People come from all kinds of backgrounds, differing in age, gender, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, culture, religion, race, disability, and family history.

These factors shape a person's identity, values, and lived experiences. This is sometimes called **intersectionality**: the way different aspects of someone's background interact and compound. For instance, an older LGBTQ+ person may face discrimination on multiple fronts, both for their age and their sexual orientation. Social workers should be attentive to these layers so they can offer truly person-centred support.

2.4 Discussion Questions

- i. How would you explain the difference between **sexual orientation** and **gender identity** to someone unfamiliar with these terms?
- ii. Why is it important to challenge myths and misconceptions about LGBTQ+ people in a social work setting?
- iii. How can social workers create an inclusive environment for clients with diverse sexual orientations and gender identities?
- iv. How does understanding **heteronormativity** help when working with LGBTQ+ clients?
- v. Can you think of a scenario where a common misconception might get in the way of effective social work? How would you handle it?
- vi. Think about how a person's race, religion, age, or social class might shape their experience as an LGBTQ+ person. What does this look like through an intersectional lens?

Chapter 3 Legal and Professional Ethics Considerations

3.1 LGBTQ+ Rights and the Law

Legal protections for LGBTQ+ individuals in Hong Kong remain relatively limited. While same-sex sexual acts have been decriminalized, there is still no formal recognition of same-sex marriage or civil partnerships. This lack of legal status affects various aspects of LGBTQ+ life.

Key Legal Issues

- i. **Decriminalization of homosexuality:** The criminalization of same-sex acts in Hong Kong dates back to British colonial law, which at its most severe carried a maximum penalty of life imprisonment. In the 1980s, the death of a foreign police inspector, believed to have taken his own life out of fear of arrest over his sexual orientation, brought the issue into public debate. After years of discussion, the Legislative Council passed the *Crimes (Amendment) Ordinance* in 1991, officially decriminalizing private, consensual sexual acts between adult males aged 21 and over.
- ii. **Age of consent:** The 1991 reforms left some inequalities in place. The legal age of consent for male same-sex acts was set at 21, compared to 16 for heterosexual acts. This disparity was eventually challenged through judicial review (such as the 2005 *Leung VC William* case), where the court ruled that the age difference was discriminatory and violated the Basic Law. Today, while same-sex acts are no longer criminalized, opinion remains divided on anti-discrimination legislation and the legal recognition of same-sex partners.
- iii. **Hate crimes:** Hong Kong has no specific hate crime legislation protecting the LGBTQ+ community. Discrimination and violence do occur, but the current legal framework does not address these issues directly.
- iv. **Marriage and intimacy:** Same-sex couples do not enjoy the same legal rights as heterosexual couples. They cannot legally marry or enter civil partnership in Hong Kong, which creates practical difficulties around inheritance, tax benefits, and joint adoption.
- v. **Workplace discrimination:** There is currently no specific law in Hong Kong protecting LGBTQ+ individuals from workplace discrimination. While some companies have adopted inclusive policies, these are voluntary rather than legally mandated.

3.2 Family Structures Outside Statutory Marriage

Although same-sex marriage is not recognized in Hong Kong, many LGBTQ+ couples build families through other paths. These relationships may lack formal legal protections, but they are central to the emotional and well-being of the people involved.

How LGBTQ+ Couples Build Families

- i. **Co-living arrangements:** Many couples live together as partners, sharing domestic responsibilities that may include raising children or caring for elderly parents.
- ii. **Economic partnerships:** Cohabiting partners often share financial burdens like rent and household expenses. Without the legal safety nets that married couples have access

to, they may need to arrange private legal agreements such as **wills** or **enduring powers of attorney** to protect their financial futures.

- iii. **Emotional support:** Partners provide each other with love, care, and companionship. Without legal recognition, this emotional foundation becomes even more important in sustaining the relationship and creating a sense of belonging.
- iv. **Diverse family structures:** Modern families take many forms beyond the traditional **nuclear model of a father, mother, and their children**. These diverse family structures may involve different combinations of members, backgrounds, or legal relationships, but what they share is a commitment to mutual care and a life built together.

3.3 Professional Ethical Standards for Supporting Gay Men and Their Families

When supporting LGBTQ+ individuals, social workers should follow ethical guidelines to ensure respect and inclusivity.

- i. **Safeguarding well-being:** Social workers must refuse to refer clients to harmful practices such as **conversion therapy**, and should instead affirm and support clients in accepting their identity.
- ii. **Cultural sensitivity:** LGBTQ+ individuals come from diverse backgrounds (see “intersectionality” in Section 2.3). Social workers need to understand how culture influences identity acceptance and mental health.
- iii. **Respect for self-determination:** Clients have the right to make decisions about their own lives and relationships. Social workers should provide guidance without imposing their personal beliefs.

3.4 Confidentiality and Disclosure Considerations

Confidentiality is especially important given the social stigma LGBTQ+ people face. Many feel unsafe sharing their identity, which makes how social workers handle personal information all the more critical.

- i. **Privacy:** Personal data must be strictly protected. Never share details of a client's sexual orientation or gender identity without their consent.
- ii. **Informed consent:** Explicit consent must be obtained before any disclosure, with clear explanations of why the information needs to be shared and what the potential consequences may be.
- iii. **Safe space:** Clients should be reassured that their information will only be shared when legally or ethically required, such as in cases involving immediate safety risks.

3.5 Discussion Questions

- i. How can social workers keep up with LGBTQ+ rights and legal developments in Hong Kong? What channels or resources are most useful?
- ii. What challenges might arise when supporting gay men and their families in a society that does not recognize same-sex marriage?
- iii. Why is confidentiality particularly important when working with LGBTQ+ clients compared to other service groups?
- iv. How would you handle an ethical dilemma around **disclosing a client's sexual orientation or gender identity**?
- v. What can social workers do to advocate for policy changes that benefit the LGBTQ+ community?

Chapter 4 Sensitivity Toward Sexual Orientation

4.1 Understanding Diversity and Intersectionality

Social workers must appreciate the diversity within the LGBTQ+ community and respect the many ways people explore their identities. Creating an inclusive and supportive environment means acknowledging these differences and ensuring services are culturally sensitive to a range of beliefs and traditions.

Creating an Inclusive Environment

Many LGBTQ+ individuals (including gay men) face discrimination, bullying, and exclusion in schools, workplaces, and social settings. These experiences take a toll on mental health, self-esteem, and overall well-being.

Social workers can help build safe and inclusive environments by:

- i. Collaborating with schools and workplaces to implement anti-discrimination policies.
- ii. Providing education and training on LGBTQ+ issues.
- iii. Offering resources and support to those facing discrimination.
- iv. Encouraging open discussions about diversity and inclusion.

4.2 Addressing Intersectionality and Multiple Identities

Social workers must understand how different aspects of a person's identity interact and shape their experience. A gay man who is also an ethnic minority, for example, may face discrimination on two fronts: race and sexual orientation. Similarly, a person living with a disability who is also LGBTQ+ may encounter challenges that stem from both their identity and the physical barriers they navigate daily.

Social workers should:

- i. Recognize the pressures that come from multiple forms of **marginalization** without making assumptions based on any single aspect of a client's identity.
- ii. Ensure services are inclusive and take each client's unique background into account.

4.3 The Impact of Stigma, Discrimination, and Minority Stress

LGBTQ+ individuals often endure social stigma, which can lead to stress, anxiety, and other mental health challenges. This is known as **minority stress**, and it builds up through chronic experiences of exclusion, prejudice, and social isolation.

Common sources of minority stress include:

- i. **Family rejection** such as being disowned or treated unfairly by family members.
- ii. **Workplace discrimination**, whether through unfair treatment or outright harassment.
- iii. **Social stigma**, where negative attitudes and stereotypes leave people feeling unsafe in public spaces.
- iv. **Legal inequality**, where the absence of legal protections deepens feelings of insecurity and vulnerability.

4.4 Filial Piety, Family Expectations, and Cultural Norms

In Chinese culture, especially within traditional families, **filial piety** plays a central role in shaping expectations around marriage and having children. These expectations can put immense pressure on gay men to remain “in the closet” or even enter heterosexual marriages to fulfil family obligations.

- i. **Lineage and continuity:** The expectation for sons to marry and have children to carry on the family name remains deeply rooted in Chinese families.
- ii. **“Face” and social image:** Coming out may be perceived as “losing face” or bringing shame to the family, which can lead relatives to respond with rejection or silence.
- iii. **Confucian values:** Confucian thought treats heterosexual marriage as the normative ideal, marginalizing non-heterosexual individuals.

4.5 Patterns of Family Reaction

Family reactions in Hong Kong range from outright rejection to **silent tolerance** and, in time, eventual acceptance. These responses often follow recognized cultural patterns such as:

- i. **Silence and avoidance:** Many families adopt a “don’t ask, don’t tell” attitude in order to avoid open conflict.
- ii. **Conditional acceptance:** Some families may “accept” the son's identity as long as he fulfils other filial duties like providing financial support or caring for elderly parents.
- iii. **Progressive acceptance:** An increasing number of families—especially those with higher education or greater awareness of the LGBTQ+ community—are showing support and even actively advocating for their gay children’s rights.

4.6 Practical Strategies for Social Workers

When promoting LGBTQ-affirmative practice, social workers must balance clinical goals with sensitivity.

- i. **Mediating between family and client:**
 - a. Help parents understand that being gay is an integral part of their son's identity, not a rejection of the family.
 - b. Use cultural metaphors that emphasize love, care, and harmony rather than focusing solely on individual autonomy.
- ii. **Reframing filial piety:** Emphasize that a gay son can still be **filial** by caring for his parents, maintaining close relationships, and upholding family values of respect and loyalty.
- iii. **Respecting individual pace:**
 - a. Moving from tolerance to acceptance takes time, and it is important not to rush the process.
 - b. Validate parents' emotions while gently challenging any misinformation or stigma.
- iv. **Introducing peer support and role models:**
 - a. Invite parents who have accepted their children to share their experiences.
 - b. Share local media (e.g., films like *Suk Suk* or *All Shall Be Well*) and case studies to help families understand diverse family formations.

4.7 The Role of Religion and Tradition

Many families hold conservative religious values (e.g., Catholic or Protestant), which can influence their views on LGBTQ+ issues.

- i. Be prepared to engage with religious values without being confrontational, approaching them instead with curiosity and compassion.
- ii. Highlight ideas of **love, inclusion, and compassion** found within most faith traditions.

4.8 Practical Recommendations

- i. **Use culturally relevant language:** Avoid overly Western-centric terminology that might feel alienating to parents.
- ii. **Bridge the generation gap:** Help both the younger and older generations learn how to communicate effectively.
- iii. **Support emotional expression:** Chinese families often struggle to express affection openly. Help them find culturally comfortable ways to show love and support.
- iv. **Acknowledge intergenerational trauma:** Understand that the fear of social judgment may have roots in past historical traumas or social upheavals.

4.9 Discussion Questions

- i. How do culture, religious beliefs, and values impact the experiences of LGBTQ+ individuals in Hong Kong?
- ii. What strategies can social workers use to foster inclusion in workplaces or local communities?
- iii. How should a social worker approach **intersectionality** when a client holds multiple marginalized identities?
- iv. What specific challenges does **minority stress** create, and how can social workers provide support?
- v. How does **filial piety** affect a client's relationship with their family?
- vi. What sensitive strategies would you use to engage family members who are resistant or avoidant?
- vii. If a family practices **silent acceptance**, how would you support them in moving toward open support?
- viii. In your practice, how do religious values and sexual identity intersect?

Chapter 5 Creating a Safe and Inclusive Environment

5.1 Providing Safe and Friendly Spaces

Social workers play a pivotal role in supporting LGBTQ+ individuals and their families. Creating a safe and welcoming space is essential for building trust and encouraging open dialogue. This can be achieved through inclusive communication, respect for privacy, and actively challenging discriminatory behaviour.

- i. **Social workers in social service agencies**
 - a. **Integrated Family Service Centres (IFSCs):** These centres provide support for individuals and families facing various challenges. Social workers should ensure that LGBTQ+ clients and their families feel welcome and respected.
 - b. **Inclusive language and communication:** Use respectful, inclusive language when speaking with clients and their families. Ensure all staff are trained in appropriate LGBTQ+ terminology, and always respect a client's preferred name and pronouns.
 - c. **Confidentiality and privacy:** Emphasize to all staff the importance of confidentiality for LGBTQ+ clients. Ensure that personal information and shared experiences are respected and kept strictly confidential.
- ii. **School social workers:** Schools can be challenging environments for LGBTQ+ students due to bullying, discrimination, and a lack of inclusive policies. School social workers should strive to create a more supportive and safe learning environment by...
 - a. **Promoting inclusive language:** Use gender-neutral, inclusive language when interacting with students. Avoid assumptions about a student's gender identity or sexual orientation, and encourage staff and students to use preferred names and pronouns.
 - b. **Addressing bullying and harassment:** Establish clear policies and procedures to prevent and respond to bullying based on sexual orientation or gender identity. Ensure all reports of bullying are taken seriously and handled promptly.
 - c. **Supporting LGBTQ+ students:** Provide safe spaces, such as LGBTQ+ student groups or counselling support, where students can freely express their identity without fear of discrimination.

5.2 Respectful and Inclusive Language

Language plays a vital role in creating a supportive environment. Using correct terminology shows respect and helps LGBTQ+ individuals feel seen and valued.

- i. **Respecting names and pronouns**
 - a. Always use the name and pronouns (e.g., he/him, she/her, they/them) chosen by the individual. If unsure, ask politely and make an effort to use them correctly.
 - b. Encourage others, such as colleagues and students, to respect the individual's preferred name and pronouns.
- ii. **Avoiding assumptions**
 - a. Do not assume a person's sexual orientation or gender identity based on their appearance or behaviour.
 - b. Allow clients to self-identify and describe their experiences in their own words.
- iii. **Avoiding outdated or offensive terms**

- a. **Never** use outdated, derogatory, or discriminatory slang, including, highly offensive and negative Cantonese slurs.
- b. Be mindful of culturally specific insults or offensive phrases that can cause harm to LGBTQ+ individuals.
- iv. **Using gender-neutral and inclusive language**
 - a. Replace gendered terms with neutral ones whenever possible. For example, use “partner” rather than assuming “husband” or “wife.”
 - b. When referring to someone whose gender is unknown or who is non-binary, use appropriate neutral language. In a Chinese-language context, this may mean using the person’s name directly or a neutral term.

5.3 An Affirming and Supportive Inclusive Environment

A truly inclusive space goes beyond language and policy. It requires ongoing education and a willingness to examine biases.

- i. **Training and education:** Social workers should regularly participate in workshops on gender and sexuality issues to deepen their understanding and strengthen their ability to support clients with diverse sexual orientations and unique struggles.
- ii. **Services aligned with lived experiences:** Ensure that services reflect and support h the actual lives and circumstances of diverse clients.
- iii. **Visual cues:** Display inclusive symbols such as LGBTQ+ posters or rainbow flags to signal that a space is welcoming and safe.
- iv. **Community engagement:** Collaborate with LGBTQ+ organizations to provide resources and support for clients.

5.4 Discussion Questions

- i. What are the key elements in creating a safe and welcoming space for LGBTQ+ clients?
- ii. How can school social workers establish a supportive and inclusive environment for LGBTQ+ students?
- iii. How can social workers in Integrated Family Service Centres ensure their practice aligns with LGBTQ+ inclusion principles?
- iv. Why is it so important to use respectful, inclusive language when working with gay men and their families?
- v. Can you share an example where using inclusive language made a meaningful difference to a client’s experience?

Chapter 6 Working with LGBTQ+ Individuals

6.1 Building Trust and Connection:

- i. **Creating a friendly space:** Show respect and acceptance for gay men by using inclusive language and displaying supportive symbols like rainbow flags or posters. Aim to create an open, non-judgmental environment.
- ii. **Active listening:** Listen carefully to clients' experiences, feelings, and concerns. Validate their emotions and avoid subjective judgments.
- iii. **Cultural understanding:** Familiarize yourself with LGBTQ+ history, rights, and relevant issues to better understand clients' perspectives. Being well-informed helps you connect with clients and provide more meaningful support.

6.2 Supporting Emotional and Mental Health

- i. **Providing a safe and confidential space:** Ensure gay men feel safe sharing their emotions and concerns. Protect their privacy and reassure them that their information will be handled with care.
- ii. **Providing emotional support:** Help clients navigate personal challenges such as identity acceptance, self-esteem, and experiences of discrimination. Provide **identity-affirming counselling** that validates their experiences and helps them develop coping strategies.
- iii. **Addressing discrimination and stigma:** Support clients in managing the stress that comes from social stigma or rejection. Encourage resilience and help them build confidence in their identity.

6.3 Assisting the Coming Out Process

- i. **Respecting individual choice:** Every person's journey is unique. Let the client decide when and how to come out. Offer support, but never pressure them.
- ii. **Providing practical resources:** Share information about LGBTQ+ organizations, support groups, and helplines. These resources can offer valuable assistance during the coming out process and provide a sense of community and belonging.
- iii. **Providing emotional encouragement:** Coming out can be a difficult and emotional experience. As an LGBTQ+-affirming listener, validate their feelings and let them know they are not alone.

6.4 Discussion Questions

- i. How can social workers build trust and develop a strong professional relationship with gay clients?
- ii. What strategies can social workers use to support the mental and emotional health of gay clients?
- iii. What should a social worker approach supporting a gay client through the coming out process?
- iv. What role does empathy play when gay clients face crises or periods of personal growth?
- v. How might a social worker's own biases affect their work with gay clients? What steps can they take to recognize and address these biases?

Chapter 7 Working with LGBTQ+ Individuals and Their Families

7.1 Understanding Family Dynamics and Challenges

When a family member comes out, relatives may experience a wide range of emotions and challenges. While some families are very supportive, others may struggle with confusion and fear, or find acceptance difficult because of cultural norms, religious beliefs, or traditional values. Common challenges include:

- i. A lack of understanding about LGBTQ+ identities.
- ii. Fear of social stigma or discrimination.
- iii. Difficulty adjusting to new family dynamics.
- iv. Tension between personal beliefs and a child's LGBTQ+ identity.

By understanding these challenges, social workers can provide more appropriate support to both the gay individuals and their families.

7.2 Supporting Parents and LGBTQ+ Children

When a child comes out, parents and caregivers may react in very different ways, from full acceptance to denial or even rejection. It is crucial to support them in processing their emotions and help them understand their child's identity through ways such as:

- i. **Providing accurate information:** Help them learn about LGBTQ+ identities and sexual orientation, and help correct any misconceptions.
- ii. **Encouraging open dialogue:** Create a safe space where they can ask questions and express feelings without fear of judgment.
- iii. **Sharing positive stories:** Introduce them to real-life examples of LGBTQ+ people and supportive families to alleviate fears and clear up misunderstandings.
- iv. **Connecting to resources:** Recommend support groups, counselling services, or LGBTQ+ organizations that can support them along the way.

7.3 Facilitating Family Communication

Coming out can sometimes lead to misunderstandings, tension, or conflict within the family. Social workers can help by improving communication and fostering mutual understanding. Key strategies include:

- i. **Practicing active listening:** Encourage each family member to express their thoughts and feelings without interruption.
- ii. **Teaching respectful dialogue:** Guide family members in how to communicate without blame or judgment.
- iii. **Promoting empathy:** Help parents and caregivers see things from their child's perspective, and vice versa.
- iv. **Seeking compromise:** Find common ground where both the LGBTQ+ member and their relatives feel respected and valued.
- v. **Referring to professional support:** If conflict is severe, suggest professional family therapy to facilitate long-term healing and reconciliation.

7.4 Addressing Concerns Regarding Extended Family

Some LGBTQ+ individuals and their parents worry about how extended family members, such as grandparents or other relatives, will react. They may fear rejection, discrimination, or estrangement. Ways to address these concerns include:

- i. **Discussing different approaches:** Some families choose to tell relatives proactively, while others prefer to wait for the right moment. Respect each family's decision.
- ii. **Building coping skills:** Help family members prepare for common questions or negative reactions.
- iii. **Offering mediation:** If tensions arise, social workers can facilitate discussions to build understanding.
- iv. **Encouraging a "chosen family" network:** If extended family is unsupportive, help the individual build a strong support system (or "chosen family") through friends, community groups, or LGBTQ+ networks.

7.5 Discussion Questions

- i. What are some common challenges parents of LGBTQ+ individuals face, and how can social workers support them?
- ii. How can social workers help improve communication between gay men and their families?
- iii. How should a social worker intervene when family conflict arises over a member's sexual orientation or gender identity?
- iv. What strategies can social workers use to address concerns related to the extended family?
- v. How can social workers help family members develop a more inclusive and accepting attitude toward their LGBTQ+ relatives?

Chapter 8 Support Services

8.1 Referral and Resource Networks for LGBTQ+ Individuals and Families

Support networks are vital for gay men and their families, helping them access information, emotional support, and professional services. Social workers should be familiar with the existing resources in Hong Kong so they can make appropriate referrals. Such support services include:

- i. **LGBTQ+ support groups:** Organizations offering peer support, social activities, and counselling.
- ii. **Mental health services:** Professional counselling and psychotherapy for individuals and families.
- iii. **Legal and advocacy groups:** Services providing legal advice on discrimination, housing, and family matters.
- iv. **HIV prevention and health services:** Clinics and programmes providing HIV testing, Pre-Exposure Prophylaxis (PrEP), and sexual health education.

For a detailed list of community resources and support groups, see Chapter 13.

8.2 Collaboration with LGBTQ+ Community Organizations

Partnerships between social workers and LGBTQ+ organizations strengthen the support available to individuals and their families, including but not limited to:

- i. **Joint events and workshops:** Organizing seminars on LGBTQ+ rights, mental health, and family acceptance.
- ii. **Referral services:** Linking clients to LGBTQ+ organizations that provide specialized support.
- iii. **Public awareness initiatives:** Partnering with LGBTQ+ organizations to raise public awareness and promote social inclusion
- iv. **Resource sharing:** Exchanging information, training experiences, and expertise to improve the quality of services.

Building strong community ties ensures that social workers provide the highest quality support to their clients (Please refer to Chapter 13. Community Resources).

8.3 Policy Change and Social Equality

LGBTQ+ individuals still face discrimination in areas such as employment, housing, and healthcare. Social workers play a key role in advocating for equal rights and policy improvements. Some practical ways to contribute include:

- i. **Raising public awareness:** Educating the general public and policymakers on LGBTQ+ issues.
- ii. **Promoting legal protections:** Supporting anti-discrimination legislation and policies that protect the rights of LGBTQ+ individuals.
- iii. **Collaborating with community groups:** Working together to promote social inclusion and welcoming environments.
- iv. **Speaking up in professional settings:** Encouraging workplaces, schools, and medical institutions to adopt inclusive policies.

8.4 Discussion Questions

- i. How should social workers go about identifying appropriate resources and referral networks for gay men and their families in Hong Kong?
- ii. What role do community organizations play in supporting LGBTQ+ individuals and their families? How can social workers collaborate with them?
- iii. What can social workers do to advocate for policy improvements and broader social change for Hong Kong's LGBTQ+ community?
- iv. How would you support a client when relevant resources are limited in their area?
- v. How can social workers build partnerships with LGBTQ+ organizations to create a stronger support network for their clients?

Chapter 9 Self-Care for Social Workers

9.1 The Emotional Weight of the Work

Supporting LGBTQ+ people and their families can be deeply rewarding, but it also takes an emotional toll. Social workers often hear stories of discrimination, trauma, and rejection, and over time, this can lead to stress and exhaustion. Some common emotional challenges include:

- i. Feeling overwhelmed by what clients are going through
- ii. Feeling frustrated with the slow pace of social change
- iii. Being personally affected when clients' experiences touch on your own feelings about discrimination or trauma
- iv. Experiencing compassion fatigue from the ongoing demands of advocacy and support work

Recognizing these challenges is the first step toward looking after yourself and staying emotionally well.

9.2 Self-Care Strategies

To give your best support to clients, it is important to look after your own physical and mental well-being first. Some helpful self-care strategies include:

- i. **Setting boundaries:** Avoid over-extending yourself by taking on too much of your clients' emotional weight; maintain a healthy professional distance.
- ii. **Seeking peer support:** Talk with colleagues or join support groups for social workers.
- iii. **Practicing self-care:** Engage in hobbies, exercise, meditation, or other relaxing activities.
- iv. **Taking breaks:** Allow yourself time to **recharge** and detach from emotionally heavy work.
- v. **Using supervision or counselling:** Utilize professional clinical supervision to process and experience difficult emotions.

9.3 Discussion Questions

- i. What emotional challenges might social workers face when serving LGBTQ+ clients? How can these be addressed?
- ii. Why is self-care especially important for social workers responding to the emotional demands of LGBTQ+-related work?
- iii. How can social workers recognize the signs of burnout in themselves, and what strategies can help prevent it?
- iv. How can social workers balance **empathy and emotional engagement** with **maintaining healthy professional boundaries**?
- v. What resources or strategies would you use to look after your own emotional well-being in a demanding work environment?

Chapter 10 Case Studies

10.1 Case examples

Case studies provide concrete examples of the challenges LGBTQ+ people and their families may face and show how social workers can step in effectively.

Case 1: A Student Facing Bullying

Chun, a 16-year-old gay student, is being bullied at school because of his sexual orientation. He reported it to his teachers, but the bullying continued, leaving him feeling isolated and anxious. Chun turns to a social worker for support.

Case Discussion

- i. **When reporting systems fall short:** If a school's anti-bullying process has failed, how should a social worker go about re-evaluating it? And during any intervention, how can you minimize the risk of **secondary trauma** or the student being labelled a **snitch**?
- ii. **Communicating with school leadership:** If school leaders are hesitant about LGBTQ+ awareness training—whether because of religious beliefs or concerns about parent complaints—how can a social worker make the case for **student safety** and **campus inclusion** in terms of legal and professional responsibilities?
- iii. **Navigating power dynamics:** When mediating with students who have bullied someone like Chun, how do you balance correcting the behaviour with preventing retaliation? If the bullying student's parents believe that marginalizing LGBTQ+ people is justified, how do you navigate that tension between family values and the school's anti-bullying principles?
- iv. **Building visible/invisible safety nets:** Beyond formal support groups, how can schools create a **welcoming atmosphere for LGBTQ+ students** in daily life—for example, by displaying rainbow symbols or using gender-neutral language—so that students who are not out feel safe?
- v. **Separating external criticism from self-worth:** How can you help Chun understand that other people's negative actions do not define his value? What practical steps (e.g., social media protection or finding allies on campus) can be introduced right away?
- vi. **Professional collaborations:** How can social workers bring hesitant or biased teachers on board as **allies**? What specific tools or approaches can they offer to frontline teaching staff?

Social Work Intervention

- i. **Investigating and documenting:** Work with Chun to document incidents and engage with school leadership to ensure anti-bullying policies are enforced.
- ii. **Creating a safe environment:** Organize awareness training for staff and students. Establish peer mentor programs that offer safe spaces.
- iii. **Providing counselling and emotional support:** Provide individual counselling to help Chun process any trauma experienced and build resilience.
- iv. **Equipping teachers as allies:** Give teachers practical tools for responding to exclusionary remarks in the classroom.

Tips for professionals: We can't eliminate discrimination overnight, but we can be the steadiest source of support standing behind the child.

Case 2: The Silent Family

Ming, 19, is an only child in a stable relationship with his boyfriend. Six months ago, he came out to his mother, believing she would be open-minded about it. She was shocked but didn't scold him, and promised to find the right time to tell his father.

Half a year has passed, and the family has settled into an unsettling silence. Both parents now know about Ming's sexual orientation, but neither one brings it up. They still ask when he's going to get a girlfriend and try to set him up with friend's daughters. This "pretending nothing happened" approach is weighing heavily on Ming who feels like an invisible person in his own home, and his connection with his family has grown distant and hollow. He has turned to a social worker for support.

Case Discussion

The core question in this case is whether silence is a form of protection or a form of harm. In a Chinese cultural context, social workers need to recognize that silence can carry multiple meanings.

- i. **Silence as protection:** Ming's mother may be aware of his father's health concerns (such as hypertension or heart disease) or his stern temperament. Fearing that the truth could affect his health or fracture the family, she may be using silence as a way to buffer the impact.
- ii. **Silence as harm:** For Ming, silence feels like a refusal to acknowledge who he really is. Over time, this kind of alienation can erode self-esteem and cause lasting psychological harm.
- iii. **Respecting family autonomy:** In Chinese culture, full transparency is not always seen as the only path forward. Social workers should respect the family's right to decide when and how to address this, rather than pushing for a dramatic moment of confrontation.

Social Work Intervention

Scenario I: The mother is willing to cooperate and support communication

- i. **Individual counselling:** Help Ming understand that his mother's silence may come from a mix of love and fear, and acknowledge the difficult role she has been playing as the family's emotional buffer.
- ii. **Gradual disclosure:** Support the mother in gently introducing information about LGBTQ+ diversity to the father, avoiding confrontation by adopting a pace that allows her to gauge how receptive he is.

This approach can ease the pressure of awkward topics like "when are you getting a girlfriend?" and shift the family conversation away from who's right or wrong toward simply caring for each other.

Scenario II: The mother chooses to maintain the status quo

- i. **Damage control:** Accept that the family may not be ready to address this openly for now. Instead, help Ming build a support network beyond the home (e.g., a LGBTQ+ community group) to ease his sense of isolation.
- ii. **Negotiating boundaries:** Help Ming negotiate personal boundaries with his parents. Even if they aren't ready to talk about his sexual orientation, he can still ask that they respect his privacy.

Maintains apparent harmony to preserve family functioning while Ming learns to live with “partial acceptance,” thereby reducing his psychological stress.

Scenario III: The mother is resistant or refuses to communicate

- i. **Crisis intervention:** Prioritize addressing the mother's anxiety that the family could fall apart and connect her with professional resources that support parents of LGBTQ+ children.
- ii. **Safety planning:** Develop a contingency plan in case the mother reacts badly, making sure Ming is physically safe.

Rather than pressing on sensitive topics, the priority is keeping the family connected to professional support. This leaves the door open for future progress and helps prevent secondary trauma or estrangement.

Discussion Questions

- i. **The hidden cost of silence:** When a family refuses to talk about what matters most, the surface-level calm can leave the child feeling completely unseen. How can social workers help parents understand that looking the other way is itself a form of harm?
- ii. **The mother's double bind:** Caught between protecting her son and deferring to her husband, mothers in this position often face intense inner tension. How can a social worker help her move from being a messenger to becoming a bridge for communication, rather than staying caught between Ming and his father?
- iii. **Cultural sensitivity and the art of face:** In Chinese society, choosing not to say what everyone already knows can sometimes be a gentle way of leaving room for everyone. How can social workers tell the difference between silence that protects and silence that oppresses?
- iv. **The limits of autonomy:** If Ming insists on telling his father himself but his mother fears for her husband's health, how should the social worker balance the client's right to self-determination with the family's well-being?

Social Work Intervention

- i. **Recognizing passive avoidance:** Help parents see that while silence may keep the peace for now, it comes at the cost of their child's long-term trust.
- ii. **Finding gentler ways in:** Suggest that Ming avoid dramatic confrontations. Instead, everyday moments—like watching a film together—can open the door to conversations about LGBTQ+ topics naturally and at a comfortable pace.
- iii. **Managing expectations:** Help Ming understand that not every coming out ends in a hug. In some families, a kind of quiet coexistence—not interfering, not rejecting—can be its own culturally specific form of acceptance.

Tips for professionals: Silence in a family can sometimes be a gentle form of protection, but it can also be a type of violence. The social worker's role is to help transform that deadly silence into a space for reflection, and to wait for the moment when love can flow again.

Case 3: Suicidal Ideation and Self-Harm

Wai-keung, 19, has faced rejection and hostility from his family since coming out. His parents view his orientation as a source of shame for the family and refuse to communicate with him. Over time, Wai-keung has developed low self-esteem and begun having thoughts of self-harm. He has sought support and intervention from a social worker.

His parents also reached out for help, but their request is for the social worker to “cure” Wai-keung and make him heterosexual.

Discussion Questions

- i. **Prioritizing crisis intervention:** When a client is showing low self-esteem along with suicidal thoughts, how should a social worker decide between focusing on family mediation and carrying out a life safety assessment?
- ii. **Responding to parental hostility:** If parents express extreme rejection during mediation (e.g., viewing homosexuality as a mental illness or source of family shame) what strategies can the social worker use to challenge these misconceptions without pushing the parents further away?
- iii. **Reframing filial piety and identity:** In a Chinese cultural context, how can the social worker help Wai-keung's parents see that disclosing his sexual orientation was not a betrayal of the family, but an act of honesty rooted in trust?
- iv. **Building emotional resilience at home:** If the home environment is unlikely to improve in the short term, how can the social worker help Wai-keung create enough inner space to protect his mental health and sense of self while still living with his family?
- v. **Connecting with community support:** Beyond professional counselling, what role can LGBTQ+-specific services play in helping Wai-keung rebuild his self-esteem? How can a sense of community belonging help fill the gap left by a lack of family support?
- vi. **Navigating an ethical dilemma:** If parents demand the social worker to help “correct” their son's sexual orientation through conversion therapy, how should the worker firmly uphold professional ethics while still maintaining enough of a relationship with the parents to continue the family counselling work?

Social Work Intervention

- i. **Responding to immediate risk:** Focus first on assessing the severity of Wai-keung's self-harm risk. Work with him to create a safety plan, identify emotional triggers, and make sure he has access to crisis support resources (e.g., hotlines).
- ii. **Building emotional resilience:** Help Wai-keung find a sense of inner safety even within a difficult home environment. This includes teaching emotional regulation skills and helping him separate his parents' anger from his own sense of self-worth.

Parental Work

- i. **Making space for emotions:** Allow the parents to express anger and grief. Treat their reactions as part of a grieving process (mourning the loss of their original expectations for their son).
- ii. **Reframing “coming out”:** Use a cultural lens to help parents understand that coming out is not an act of rebellion, but one of trust and honesty. In its own way, it is a form of filial piety—Wai-keung no longer wants to lie to those closest to him.
- iii. **Gently challenging stigma:** Offer medical and psychological evidence to explain that sexual orientation is neither a mental illness nor the result of failed parenting.

Upholding Professional Ethics

- i. **Taking a firm stance:** When parents demand a “cure,” the social worker should be clear that, based on professional ethical guidelines, sexual orientation cannot and should not be forcibly changed.
- ii. **Redirecting the goal:** Help the parents shift their focus from changing their son to strengthening the family relationship. This includes explaining the serious psychological harm that conversion therapy causes, and helping them see that preserving their bond with Wai-keung matters more than trying to change who he is.

Self-Identity and Community Connection

- i. **Affirming identity:** Through counselling, help Wai-keung build a positive sense of who he is.
- ii. **Connecting with community:** Link Wai-keung with LGBTQ+ youth support groups, where sharing experiences with peers can help ease isolation and offer practical examples of how others have navigated family communication.
- iii. **Propose family sessions:** Joint family meetings should only be proposed when everyone is emotionally ready. It's important to accept that family acceptance may take time, and to set realistic goals that respect the pace of progress.

Tips for professionals: A family’s breakdown often stems from feeling isolated and helpless. By supporting the parents, you are indirectly protecting the child; only when parents are given room to breathe do they have the strength to love a child who is unique.

Case 4: Pressure to Get Married

Chris and Alex, a same-sex couple in their early 30s, are facing an emotional crisis brought on by years of hiding their relationship and growing pressure from their families to marry. Neither has come out to their parents. Chris feels that Alex seems weak when it comes to standing up to family pressure, while Alex is deeply stressed, afraid of how his parents might react and worried about the effect on their health.

Both men, though, are very close to their elder sisters. They want their families to accept them and hope to come out to their sisters first, then ask for their help in working out how to approach their parents. With this in mind, they have reached out to a social worker for support.

Discussion Questions

- i. **Siblings as allies:** In the context of Hong Kong family dynamics, why is coming out to siblings (such as elder sisters) often a more effective first step than going directly to parents? How should a social worker assess whether a sibling is well-suited to act as a bridge?
- ii. **Imbalanced family support:** If one partner's siblings are highly supportive while the other's are indifferent or opposed, how should the social worker help the couple navigate that imbalance?
- iii. **Different paces of coming out:** When Chris is eager to come out but Alex is still afraid, how can the social worker help them find common ground so that the process doesn't become a source of tension that damages their relationship?
- iv. **Risks when involving siblings:** When siblings are invited to be part of the disclosure to parents, how can the social worker help them avoid taking over (e.g., speaking on their brother) to ensure parents can directly hear their son in his own words?
- v. **Cultural values as a resource:** How can the social worker use values like family harmony or sibling bonds to encourage siblings to support their brothers, and help soften the parents' potential reaction?
- vi. **Boundaries during intervention:** Should the social worker take a leading role or a consultative one when the couple and their siblings are planning how to come out? How can the social worker make sure that Chris and Alex remain in control of the process?

Social Work Intervention

- i. **Partner Consensus and Alliance Building**
 - a. **Couples counselling** Facilitate sessions to help Chris and Alex express their underlying fears and expectations. Before working on a coming out strategy, address the tension that stress has created between them so they can approach their families as a team.
- ii. **Developing a Coming Out Strategy**
 - a. **Assessment and preparation:** Talk through what is motivating them to come out to their siblings and what reactions they might expect. Help them reflect on questions like “What role do these siblings play in the family?” and “What practical support could they offer?”
 - b. **Role-playing:** Practise how to be open with their siblings about the relationship and how to explain why their support and discretion are needed.
- iii. **Engaging the Siblings**
 - a. **Joint meetings:** If the siblings respond positively, the social worker may invite them to participate in a joint session with the couple.
 - b. **Strategic planning:** Leverage the siblings' knowledge of the parents' personalities and health to determine the most appropriate timing (e.g., avoiding major holidays or periods of illness).
 - c. **Role allocation:** Discuss what role each sibling will play on the day itself—whether as a quiet presence, an emotional support, or someone who can help ease tensions if needed.

iv. Collaborative Disclosure to Parents

- a. **Preparing for questions:** The social worker assists Chris, Alex, and their siblings in formulating a response plan for questions parents may ask, such as those around grandchildren, caring for parents in old age, or social stigma.
- b. **Showing family unity:** Help the parents perceive that this is not just their son's individual decision, but a family event understood and supported by other family members.

v. Family Reconstruction Work

- a. **Post-disclosure follow-up:** After coming out to the parents, the social worker must continue to check in on the parents' emotional reactions and help the couple and their siblings give the parents space and time to process the information.

Tips for professionals: Coming out doesn't have to be something you face alone. Siblings can be powerful allies—their support can help cushion the emotional weight of those first conversations with parents.

Case 5: Justice or Disclosure?

Chi-wai, 45, has worked at the same company for over 15 years. Recently, he has faced verbal bullying and deliberate exclusion from colleagues and supervisors because of his sexual orientation. With no specific legal protections in place, Chi-wai is considering a civil claim for wrongful dismissal or breach of employment contract. But taking legal action would likely mean his identity as a gay man becomes public through media coverage.

Chi-wai has not yet come out to his wife. He knows that if she finds out through someone else before he has the chance to tell her himself, their marriage may not survive. He wants her to be an ally in the lawsuit, but he is afraid of what the truth will mean for them. He has turned to a social worker for help.

Case Discussion

- i. **The price of justice:** In a context without clear legal protections, pursuing workplace justice often means putting your privacy on the line. How should a social worker help Chi-wai weigh whether the chances of winning are worth the risk to his family's stability?
- ii. **The timing of coming out:** If Chi-wai's wife feels he is only telling her because he needs her support for the lawsuit rather than out of honesty toward the marriage, she may feel deeply used. How can the social worker help Chi-wai lead with his vulnerability rather than the legal urgency?
- iii. **Trauma-informed support for the wife:** For the wife, this is not just about sexual orientation; it is about years of not knowing. How should the social worker address her sense of betrayal and her questions about whether their life together was real?
- iv. **Safety and privacy:** If legal proceedings begin, media attention may follow. How can the social worker work with legal counsel to pursue justice while protecting the family's privacy and shielding them from harassment?

Social Work Intervention

Phase I: Preparation and Building Readiness

- i. **Clarifying motivation:** Help Chi-wai think through whether he is telling his wife because he wants her as a genuine partner in this, or simply to ease his own guilt.
- ii. **Practising for difficult questions:** Use role-play to prepare for the hardest questions his wife might ask (e.g., “Was everything between us an act?”) and help him respond with honesty rather than defensiveness.
- iii. **Making the decision:** Support Chi-wai in reaching a clear decision between maintaining the status quo and dropping the lawsuit, or moving forward with coming out and filing the claim.

Phase II

Scenario I: The wife is willing to meet and wants to understand

- i. **Facilitating joint sessions:** Help Chi-wai share both his sexual orientation and the legal risks in a neutral setting, with the social worker present as emotional support.
- ii. **Reframing the situation:** Gently shift the focus from Chi-wai's years of secrecy toward the workplace injustice he is facing. Help the wife see him as someone who has been discriminated against, so they can face what comes next together as a family.
- iii. **Building a united front:** Assist the couple in developing a shared approach for dealing with the outside world (media, relatives, and friends).

The couple reaches a shared understanding and enters the legal process as partners, strengthening their bond and trust in the process.

Scenario II: The wife refuses to meet

- i. **Respecting boundaries:** Accept the wife's right to refuse communication. The social worker should not pressure her to be understanding; her anger must be acknowledged as a valid traumatic response.
- ii. **Crisis support:** Help Chi-wai cope with the weight of both a family breakdown and workplace discrimination at the same time. Assess the risk of self-harm and discuss whether it still makes sense to proceed with the lawsuit.
- iii. **Respecting wishes:** If the wife asks that their private life not be exposed as part of the legal process, the social worker should help Chi-wai find a balance between pursuing justice and protecting his spouse.
- iv. **Resource referral** Connect both Chi-wai and his wife with LGBTQ+-welcoming marriage counselling for longer-term emotional support.

With the support of the social worker and legal team, Chi-wai moves forward with the lawsuit on his own. In time, he and his wife find a resolution they can both accept.

The Role of the Social Worker

- i. **Avoiding emotional blackmail:** Social workers should never say things like “He is suffering, you should support him.” This kind of framing causes further harm or secondary trauma to the wife.
- ii. **Affirming the wife's agency:** Recognize that the wife is also a victim who has been affected by years of secrecy. Her feelings are just as important as Chi-wai's pursuit of justice.

- iii. **Respecting each person's choice:** The decision to come out in pursuit of justice is Chi-wai's. The decision to stay and offer support is his wife's. The social worker's role is to make sure both of them can make informed decisions.

Tips for professionals: Seeking justice is a long journey. Family may be the only thing that can keep us going. We can't guarantee the outcome, but we can make sure no one has to go through it alone

Case 6: My Father is Gay

Uncle Leung is a 65-year-old retiree living with his son's family, who are devout Christians. Born in the 1950s, Leung grew up in an era of intense repression where homosexuality was stigmatized as a mental illness" or even a criminal offense. To avoid social stigma and fulfil the traditional expectation of carrying on the family line, Uncle Leung suppressed who he really was. He entered a conventional marriage, raised his son, and divorced 30 years ago.

For decades, Uncle Leung has kept this part of his life hidden. He suspects his adult son may have long had an inkling, but out of respect for traditional patriarchal dignity—and the awkwardness of raising something so deeply personal—neither of them has ever brought it up. This unspoken awareness has created a heavy atmosphere at home, leaving Uncle Leung feeling profoundly lonely even among the people closest to him.

In his later years, Uncle Leung met a partner, Uncle Chan. Finding a genuine connection after so many years has drawn him out of the house more often, wanting to make the most of the time he has left. But this shift unsettled the family's balance. His son grew cold, and the relationship between them hardened into a standoff. Caught between guilt toward his family and the desire to live with dignity, and worn down by years of carrying this alone, Uncle Leung has decided to seek help from a social worker. He hopes that with professional support, the silence that has lasted decades can finally begin to break.

Case Discussion

- i. **Victims of an era:** For gay men born in the 1940s and 1950s, heterosexual marriage was often a survival strategy rather than an act of deception. How can social workers help the son understand that his father's years of secrecy were actually a form of self-sacrifice made to protect the family?
- ii. **Why now—dignity, not betrayal:** Why does Uncle Leung feel the need to come out at this specific moment?
 - a. To dissolve the silence and alienation caused by the son's unspoken suspicions.
 - b. To ensure his partner, Uncle Chan, has legal standing to visit and care for him if his health declines.
- iii. **When faith and family values collide:** When Christian doctrine conflicts with the father's sexual orientation, how can a social worker help the son move toward empathy for what his father has been through, rather than defaulting to moral judgement?

Social Work Intervention

Phase I: Reflection and Integration

- i. **Confronting the past:** Work with Uncle Leung as he revisits the pressures he faced growing up at a time when homosexuality was criminalized. Help him work through feelings of guilt about having hidden his true self from his family.
- ii. **Affirming his role as a father:** Reinforce Uncle Leung's sense of what he has achieved as a father. He has fulfilled his responsibilities to his family—he deserves the chance to pursue his own happiness.

Phase II

Scenario I: The Son is Willing to Communicate

- i. **Intergenerational dialogue:** Help the son reacquaint himself that his father's 40 years of silence was the immense price he paid to give him a stable home.
- ii. **De-stigmatization:** Move the conversation away from sexual orientation and toward companionship and loneliness in old age. Help the son see Uncle Chan as someone who gives his father vital emotional support.
- iii. **Redefining “family”:** Establish new ways of spending time together, allowing Uncle Chan to gradually join family gatherings in the role of the father's close friend. The son's “anger” transforms into “compassion.” He accepts his father's true identity, and the family relationship is rebuilt on a foundation of honesty.

Scenario II: The Son Refuses to Communicate

If the son holds firmly to a religious stance, viewing his father's life as sinful and refusing to talk, the social worker can take a different approach:

- i. **Respecting family autonomy:** Accept that reconciliation is not yet possible; avoid trying to force the son past his religious convictions.
- ii. **Strengthening external support:** Help Uncle Leung find a sense of belonging within the LGBTQ+ community and strengthen his bond with Uncle Chan so that he is not emotionally dependent on his son alone.
- iii. **Legal protections:** Assist Uncle Leung put in place an **Enduring Power of Attorney** and **Advance Medical Directives** so that his healthcare decisions are protected, regardless of his son's religious views.

Uncle Leung maintains a civil but distant relationship with his son while building an independent support system—emotionally and legally—with his partner.

Tips for professionals:

- i. To the son: In an era that had no place for him, your father chose to suppress who he really was so he could raise you. That was not a lie; it was the heaviest, most selfless form of love he could offer.
- ii. To the father: You have played this role for forty years. Your honesty now is not a debt you owe to anyone else. It is the most sincere thing you can give to your own life.

10.2 Practical Strategies for Effective Intervention

- i. **LGBTQ+ culturally sensitive counselling:** Understanding how cultural attitudes towards inclusion shape a person's sense of identity.

- ii. **Trauma-informed care:** Acknowledging and responding to past experiences of discrimination.
- iii. **Affirmative approach:** Building confidence and supporting a positive sense of self.
- iv. **Family mediation:** Facilitating open dialogue.
- v. **Community engagement:** Connecting clients to LGBTQ+ networks.

10.3 Discussion Questions

- i. How will you apply the lessons from these case studies to your own practice?
- ii. What strategies would you use to support a young gay man facing rejection from his family?
- iii. How can social workers support LGBTQ+ students who are being bullied?
- iv. How does relationship counselling for same-sex couples differ from counselling for heterosexual couples?
- v. How would you approach supporting a middle-aged gay man coming out to his wife?
- vi. In Chinese culture, people often leave things unsaid to keep the peace and preserve face for the family. When an older LGBTQ+ person decides to break that silence, social workers need to consider the practical impact on their late-life security—particularly around housing, healthcare, and financial dependence. How would you help an elderly gay person talk with their family about their partner's right to visit and provide care in the event of serious illness or incapacity?

Chapter 11 Co-creating a Future of Inclusion and Acceptance

This training manual is designed to provide social workers in Hong Kong a clear framework for supporting gay men and their families with professionalism and cultural sensitivity. By understanding the diversity of sexual orientation and gender identity, and by engaging with the legal, social, and family challenges that LGBTQ+ people face, social workers can make a real difference through their work.

11.1 Review of Key Points

- i. **Affirmative practice:** Effective support begins with affirming the client's identity. Using inclusive language and creating safe spaces are the cornerstones of a trusting professional relationship.
- ii. **Family-centred intervention:** In Hong Kong, the family is the most important part of any support system. Social workers act as a bridge, helping family members find balance and reconciliation between traditional values like filial piety and accepting their children for who they are.
- iii. **An intersectional perspective:** Recognizing the multiple pressures faced by clients—such as age, social class, workplace discrimination, and mental health risks—and connecting them with a comprehensive network of referrals and support.
- iv. **Professional ethics and self-care:** Upholding professional codes of conduct regarding self-determination and confidentiality, while also looking after your own well-being to prevent burnout as you work toward social change.

11.2 Vision and Mission

The heart of social work lies in the pursuit of social justice and respect for every person's dignity. In the face of ongoing stigma and discrimination, we hope that every professional who reads this guide will not only offer warm support within the counselling room but also become a voice for inclusion in the wider community, helping to break down the barriers of prejudice.

Through continuous learning, reflection, and practice, we can help gay men and their families move from tension toward understanding, and from rejection toward acceptance. Let us work together to build an inclusive Hong Kong where everyone, regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity, can live with dignity in an environment of love and respect.

Chapter 12 Assessment and Practice

Congratulations on completing *Coming Out to Family: Supporting Gay Men and Their Families*. Please take a few minutes to conduct the following self-assessment. Check the boxes that apply to make sure you are ready to put what you have learned into practice

12.1 Knowledge

- i. I can clearly distinguish between sexual orientation and gender identity.
- ii. I understand how heteronormativity and minority stress affect the physical and mental health of gay men.
- iii. I have a working knowledge of the current legal status in Hong Kong regarding same-sex partner rights and gender recognition.
- iv. I can identify how filial piety and face in Chinese culture influence a gay man's decision to come out.

12.2 Skills

- i. I am prepared to use inclusive and affirming language at work. (e.g., respecting a client's preferred pronouns, using "partner" rather than assuming a spouse's gender).
- ii. I have learned how to help parents process the grief or anxiety that can come with a child coming out.
- iii. I know how to work with schools or workplaces to help clients facing discrimination.
- iv. I have a list of LGBTQ+-related referral resources in Hong Kong (e.g., psychological counselling, legal consultation, peer support groups).

12.3 Reflection

- i. I have reflected on my own potential biases and commit to maintaining a neutral and affirmative attitude in my work.
- ii. I understand why confidentiality is particularly important in LGBTQ+ casework (especially in preventing accidental outing).
- iii. I recognize the importance of self-care and have begun developing a plan for managing stress.

Conclusion: Family is the unconditional promise to never give up on each other.

Chapter 13 Community Resources

13.1 LGBTQ+ Organizations/Services

- **Alongside** <https://walkalongside.org/>
- **Blessed Ministry Community Church (BMCC)** <https://hkbmcc.org/>
- **Gay Games Hong Kong** <https://www.gghk2023.com/>
- **Gay Harmony** https://www.instagram.com/gay_harmony_hk/?hl=en
- **G-Dot TV** <https://gdottv.com/main/>
- **Gender Empowerment** <https://genderempowerment.org/>
- **Grey and Pride** <https://www.greypridehk.com/>
- **HEvolution** <https://www.facebook.com/hevolutionhk/>
- **HKGALA (Hong Kong Gay & Lesbian Attorneys Network)** https://www.facebook.com/hkgala/?locale=en_GB
- **Hong Kong Marriage Equality** <https://hkme.org.hk/>
- **Hugill & Ip (The HIP Pride)** <https://www.hugillandip.com/the-hip-pride/>
- **Les Corner** <http://www.lescorner.org/>
- **Next Chapter** <https://nextchapter.lgbt/#masthead>
- **OUT in HK** https://www.facebook.com/OutinHK/?_rdr
- **Pink Alliance** <https://www.pinkalliance.hk/>
- **PrideLab** <https://www.pridelab.hk>
- **PrideLine (Tung Wah Group of Hospitals)** <https://prideline.tungwahcsd.org>
- **Project Freely Love** <https://www.facebook.com/ProjectFreelyLove>
- **Project Touch - The Boys' & Girls' Clubs Association of Hong Kong** <https://www.newtouch.net/>
- **Quarks (Transgender Youth Support)** <https://www.quarkshk.org/>
- **Queer Theology Academy** <https://www.queertheo.com>
- **Sexuality for All** <https://sexualityforall.com/>
- **Society of True Light** <https://true-light.asia/>
- **The Harmonics (Hong Kong LGBTQ+ Choir)** <https://www.facebook.com/theharmonicshk/>
- **Transgender Equality Hong Kong** <http://www.tehk.org.hk/index.html>
- **Transgender Resource Centre** <https://www.tgr.org.hk/index.php/zh/>
- **We Are Families** <https://www.facebook.com/zijiren/>

13.2 Sexual Health Organizations/Services

- **AFRO (Action for REACH OUT)** <https://www.afro.org.hk>
- **AIDS Concern** <https://aidsconcern.org.hk>
- **CHOICE (Community Health Organisation for Intervention, Care and Empowerment)** <https://www.choice1069.org/>
- **Hong Kong AIDS Foundation** <https://www.aids.org.hk/>
- **Hong Kong LGBTQ+ Medical Society** <https://www.hklgbtmedicalsociety.org/>
- **Midnight Blue** <http://www.mnbhk.org/>
- **Project HERO - Hong Kong Christian Service** <https://www.hkcs.org/tc/services/project-hero>
- **SACHIV (Support and Care for HIV/AIDS - Tung Wah Group of Hospitals)** https://www.facebook.com/TWGHsSACHIV/?_rdr
- **SideBySide** <https://sidebyside.org.hk>
- **Teens Key** <https://teenskey.org/zh/>

13.3 Cultural Events

- **HK Idaho+** www.facebook.com/hk.idaho.plus
- **Hong Kong Pride Parade** www.hkpride.net
- **Pink Dot Hong Kong** <https://pinkdothk.com/>

13.4 About the Authors

Professor Travis Kong is a Professor in the Department of Sociology and the Program Director of Media, Culture and Creative Cities at the University of Hong Kong. His teaching covers gender and sexuality studies, queer theory, and media and cultural studies, with a particular research focus on Chinese gay men, sex work, and the social impact of HIV/AIDS. Professor Kong's notable publications include *Chinese Male Homosexualities: Memba, Tongzhi and Golden Boy* (Routledge 1991), *Oral Histories of Older Gay Men in Hong Kong: Unspoken and Unforgotten* (Hong Kong University Press, 2019), and *Sexuality and the Rise of China: The Post-1990s Gay Generation in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Mainland China* (Duke University Press, 2023).

Professor Kong's influence extends into the media and cultural industries. The award-winning film *Suk Suk* (directed by Ray Yeung, 2019) was based on his oral history work on older gay men in Hong Kong. Committed to community service, Professor Kong served as a board member of the Hong Kong Advisory Council on AIDS (2018–2023) and was the Principal Investigator for the HIV/AIDS Response Indicator Survey (HARiS) 2019–2020. He is also the founder of Grey and Pride (2014–), a charity dedicated to the older LGBTQ+ community in Hong Kong. In recognition of his long-term service and research contributions to the Hong Kong LGBTQ+ community, he received the Prism Award from the Hong Kong Lesbian and Gay Film Festival in 2014 and the LGBTQ+ Inclusion Advocacy Award from Community Business in 2020.

Dr. Barry Lee is the current Chairperson of *Grey and Pride*. He is a registered social worker, registered counsellor, and counselling supervisor with over 20 years of experience, and currently serves as a university lecturer and counsellor. His areas of focus include multicultural counselling, neurodiversity support, and mental health services. He has long been committed to supporting marginalized groups, including people living with HIV/AIDS, the LGBTQ+ community, and new immigrants, providing tailored clinical counselling to facilitate personal growth.

Grey and Pride is the first and only registered charitable organization in Hong Kong (91/18327) dedicated to serving and supporting the well-being of older (aged 60+) tongzhi (LGBTQ+) people.

It is committed to building a diverse and inclusive society where older LGBTQ+ people of all sexual orientations and gender identities can live free from fear and prejudice.

The Objectives of Grey and Pride are:

- To nurture positive identity and build resilience among older LGBTQ+ peoples.
- To provide training for service providers to increase their understanding of the older LGBTQ+ community and improve quality of services.
- To inform government efforts to develop policies that respond to the needs of older LGBTQ+ peoples.
- To raise public awareness of the challenges and needs of older LGBTQ+ peoples.

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