



Backgrounder: Conversion Therapy

Disclaimer: The American Counseling Association does not consider “conversion therapy” to be a valid or accepted form of counseling. We use the term here only because it is commonly recognized by the public and used in legal settings, including by the U.S. Supreme Court, to refer to efforts to change a person’s sexual orientation, gender identity or gender expression.

What is conversion therapy?

In counseling, conversion therapy encompasses a wide range of efforts to change a person’s sexual orientation, gender identity or gender expression.

Other terminology used, including by some religious communities, may include: “reparative therapy,” “gay cure therapy,” “sexual orientation change efforts,” “gender identity change efforts” or “gender-exploratory therapy.”

Other practices used to try to change a person’s sexual orientation or gender identity include a range of coercive medical, religious and community-based practices, such as brain surgery, chemical castration, surgical castration, corrective rape, prayer and exorcism.

Is conversion therapy legal?

Each state has its own laws and regulations governing the practice of conversion therapy. Most state conversion therapy restrictions apply only to licensed, certified, or registered healthcare or mental-health providers and generally do not extend to unlicensed individuals, which may include, for example, faith-based counselors or clergy.

According to the [Movement Advancement Project](#), as of early 2026:

- Twenty-three states and Washington, D.C., have full bans on licensed providers providing conversion therapy to minors.
- Seventeen states have no statewide restrictions on conversion therapy practices.
- Six states prohibit or regulate against local-government laws restricting conversion therapy practices.
- Four states have partial restrictions but do not fully prohibit licensed providers from providing conversion therapy to minors.
 - For example, an executive order in Arizona ([Executive Order 2023-13](#)) restricts all state agencies from promoting, supporting or enabling any form of conversion therapy, but the executive order does not set restrictions for providers directly.
- A few jurisdictions, such as [Washington D.C.](#), have bans extending to conversion therapy provided to adults.

Why is conversion therapy controversial?

Conversion therapy has been [widely discredited and rejected](#) by other major medical and mental health organizations, such as the American Psychiatric Association, American Psychological Association, American Medical Association, Mental Health America, American Academy of Pediatrics and World Psychiatric Association. Based on research, these organizations have deemed conversion therapy practices as harmful, unethical and lacking credible scientific evidence.

The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) [reported](#) in 2015 that conversion therapy practices with a fixed outcome (for example, gender conformity or specific sexual orientation) are “coercive” and can be harmful to children, often linked to higher rates of depression, anxiety and suicide.

What is ACA’s position on conversion therapy?

ACA does not support the use of conversion therapy because it is harmful, discredited and not backed by science.

Conversion therapy violates the core principles stated in the [ACA Code of Ethics](#). The code references the fundamental values of the counseling profession: nonmaleficence, beneficence and justice. It also states that “counselors do not use techniques/procedures/modalities when substantial evidence suggests harm, even if such services are requested.”

What are the legal ramifications of conversion therapy for counselors?

- **State Bans:** State laws and regulations on conversion therapy vary. In certain states, practicing conversion therapy on a minor is professional misconduct, subjecting counselors to disciplinary action, including license suspension or revocation. State counseling associations may have more information regarding the status and details of the law in the state(s) a counselor practices in.
- **Malpractice and Negligence:** Even in states without specific bans, counselors could have a lawsuit for malpractice filed against them if there is a viable claim of harm caused by such treatment, as it may fall below the standard of care owed.
 - For example, following the March 2026 [Supreme Court ruling in Chiles v. Salazar](#), in May 2026, Colorado enacted [HB26-1322](#), amending its prohibition to be viewpoint-neutral and allowing survivors to bring civil claims against licensed providers with no statute of limitations.
- **Consumer Fraud:** Counselors could face consumer fraud claims for advertising or offering a service that is known to be ineffective or deceptive.
- **Child Abuse:** In some situations, subjecting a minor to conversion therapy may violate child abuse and neglect laws.

Resources

- ACA Counseling Corner, January 2026: [What You Need to Know About Conversion Therapy](#)
- ACA Counseling Today, Online Exclusive, June 2026: [FAQs: U.S. Supreme Court Ruling on Conversion Therapy Ban in Colorado](#)
- ACA/SAIGE Statement: [Supreme Court Ruling in Chiles v. Salazar Poses Serious Threat to LGBTQ+ Rights and to Professional Counselors Nationwide](#)
- ACA/SAIGE/American Psychological Association: [Amicus Brief](#)

- ACA Take Action: [Oppose Conversion Therapy](#)
- American Psychiatric Association Statement: [Supreme Court Decision in Chiles v. Salazar](#)
- American Psychological Association Statement: [APA concerned about far-reaching consequences from Supreme Court decision regarding therapy as 'free speech'](#)
- GLAD Law Statement: [Supreme Court Weakens Law Protecting LGBTQ+ Youth From Conversion Therapy](#)
- Movement Advancement Project: [Conversion "Therapy" Laws map](#)
- Southern Poverty Law Center: [Conversion Therapy: Fact over Fiction](#)
- The Trevor Project Report: ["It's Still Happening: A Report on Practitioners of So-Called Conversion 'Therapy' in the U.S."](#)

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