

# TIPS FOR FINDING WHOLE-PERSON HEALTH, SUBSTANCE USE AND MENTAL HEALTH CARE

## Introduction

The decision to seek treatment for substance use and mental health challenges is an important step in the journey to physical and mental wellbeing. One part of this process is searching for a health care provider who is the right fit and can support your whole self. This can be challenging for populations with overlapping identities and dimensions of diversity, such as people who are Black, Hispanic/Latinx or LGBTQ+.\*<sup>1</sup>



**Reflecting on what you want and need in a health care provider and learning how to tell if a provider can meet your needs is an empowering way to take charge of your journey to wellness.**

## What Is an Affirming Provider?

An affirming provider is a health care provider (for example, a doctor, nurse, therapist or counselor) who supports and encourages your identities and recognizes how your experience impacts your life and health. Affirming providers can address the unique needs, concerns and health implications of people from diverse backgrounds while drawing on their strengths and cultural beliefs, norms and practices. An affirming provider is also aware that many populations have experienced harm from health care providers, and that this history of harm may impact someone's comfort or ability to access care.<sup>2</sup>



\*This resource uses the acronym LGBTQ+, as it is widely recognized. However, there are updated acronyms that include additional identities within the queer community. For example, “<sup>2</sup>SLGBTQIA+” means two-spirit, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, LGBTQ+, intersex, and asexual or aromantic. The + indicates that there are additional identities and people who hold multiple identities within the umbrella of the LGBTQ+ community. For more information on these identities and definitions of each of these terms, [visit the Center of Excellence on LGBTQ+ Behavioral Health Equity's Resources page.](#)

Dimensions of identity can be complex and nuanced, and can include race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender identity, age group, disability status and cultural background. This resource focuses on convergences of race, ethnicity and sexual orientation and gender identity; however, the information in this guide can apply to many other variations.



**Bottom line? An affirming provider is someone who supports and respects your whole identity, and recognizes that you are the expert on your life and identities.<sup>3</sup>**

## Why Is Affirming Care Important?

Individuals of diverse backgrounds may experience challenges seeking substance use and mental health treatment due to a history of discrimination and trauma in health care settings, bias from health care providers, or structural barriers such as access to health care or lower rates of insurance coverage (Health Policy Institute, n.d.).<sup>4</sup> For Black and Hispanic/Latinx and LGBTQ+ people, receiving affirming care from your provider is important for getting effective, whole-person care and for being able to trust and communicate with your provider.<sup>2</sup> In fact, for Black and Hispanic/Latinx and LGBTQ+ people, receiving affirming care from a trusted provider is proven to improve health outcomes.<sup>2,4</sup>

### Questions for Self-reflection

When you are ready for substance use or mental health treatment or support, you can use these questions to determine what is important to you in a health care provider and to help find the right fit.



1. What kind of health care provider am I looking for? What type of service do I need?
  - *To explore different types of mental health and substance use treatment providers, check out the following table.*
2. Do you prefer a provider with a similar background or identity?
  - *For example, a provider with the same race, ethnicity, sexual orientation or gender identity.*
3. Do you want to have a provider who speaks your native language?
4. Are you interested in a provider with a specialty?
  - *For example, a therapist who is trauma informed or specializes in grief counseling.*
5. What is important for a provider to know about you? What types of experiences and/or concerns do you want to share?
  - *For example, discussing experiences of racial violence, generational trauma, disability, discrimination, ageism or other personal challenges.*



## Types of Providers to Consider

Providers*	Health Care Services Offered*
Professional Counselor or Therapist	<p>Professionals licensed to provide counseling for mental health and/or substance use challenges. Therapists can have training as social workers, professional counselors, licensed addiction counselors, psychologists, and marriage and family therapists. Credentials may include LMSW, LCSW, LPC, LCPC, LPCC, LMHC, LMFT, CADC, PsyD and PhD.</p>
Substance Use Professional or Substance Use/Addiction Counselor	<p>Some health care providers specialize in substance use treatment and can be primarily or additionally licensed as a substance use professional.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Medical doctors can be licensed as an MD, DO, PA or DNP and may have additional credentials.</li> <li>■ Therapists can become licensed as clinical addiction specialists and may have additional credentials including LCAS or CADC.</li> <li>■ Individuals who aren't more broadly licensed as a therapist or professional counselor but who have done several years of training and supervision specific to substance use counseling can become licensed as substance use counselors and may have credentials including CSAC, QMHP or NCAC.</li> <li>■ Individuals in recovery who have lived experience of substance use and/or mental health diagnoses can become certified peer support professionals, or people who help those currently experiencing substance use challenges find assistance and support. They are not counselors but can provide emotional support and empathy because of their own experiences. Credentials can include PRSS and CPSS.</li> </ul>
Psychiatrists	<p>Doctors who have both medical training and specialized training in psychiatry. They are qualified to prescribe and recommend medication for managing mental health and substance use disorders and help with medication management. Credentials for this provider include MD, DO, PA and DNP.</p>
Medical Doctors	<p>Doctors licensed to practice medicine can include family medicine doctors and pediatricians. Primary care physicians can also assess mental wellbeing and prescribe medication. Credentials for this provider include MD, DO, PA and DNP.</p>

\*This is not an exhaustive list, and provider titles/credentials may vary by state.

For many people, there are different modalities and avenues to seek support, guidance and healing, and it is encouraged to seek support within your community and in the ways most relevant to your culture. Mentors, elders, or 12-step or similar program sponsors are examples of other individuals you can turn to.

Additionally, the internet can be a great place to find and learn from affirming providers, but first make sure the people you're following and listening to are legitimate. Try starting with trusted health websites or looking for the listed organizations' official social media accounts. Social media can be especially full of bad health information, so when looking for health care providers to follow, make sure they list degrees and licenses related to what they're talking about, or research them outside of social media. Remember, a health or mental health "coach" is not the same thing as a medical professional!



**Think about what is important for you in a provider and ask questions that will help you decide if they are the right fit. Also think about what information is important for your provider to know about you.**

### Questions to Ask Health Care Providers

It's important to ask prospective or existing health care providers and office staff questions that can help you understand their ability to provide affirming health care. The following questions, adapted from a resource created by [Mental Health America and Partnership to End Addiction](#), can be tailored to your specific needs and identities by inserting your own race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, or gender identity. You can ask a potential health care provider if they offer initial consultation calls for discussing these questions or bring them with you to the first appointment..

1. What is your experience and comfort level working with people of diverse backgrounds, including various races, ethnicities, genders, and sexual orientations?
2. What has your experience been working with someone that shares my identities or lived experiences?
3. How do you affirm your clients' identities? Do you allow clients to provide identity markers such as gender, pronouns, and specific cultural or racial identities on forms? How do you ensure that clients are referred to using the language they provide?
4. How do you consider your clients' identities and cultures when coming up with a treatment plan?
5. How do you stay up to date and educated on working with people from different backgrounds?
6. What is your approach to working with people of diverse backgrounds? What evidence-based practices do you use and how do you adapt them for your clients?
7. How do you create safe spaces for people to discuss their unique health needs as they relate to their background?
8. What is your understanding of the health needs of diverse populations, particularly around mental health and substance use disorders?
9. What is your understanding of the impact of oppression and discrimination on mental health?
10. How do you define cultural humility and cultural responsiveness? How do you practice these in your work?
11. How do you consider a person's overlapping identities and dimensions of diversity in treatment?

## Finding Potential Providers

Locating a health care provider near you can also be a challenge, but there are dedicated resources to help.

1. Local community organizations, including advocacy groups, health organizations, and community and cultural centers, may have referrals for health care providers who offer low-cost care or services on a sliding scale.
2. If insured, insurance companies often have website databases providing information on health care providers in their network. Insurance policyholders can also call their member services number to connect with an agent who can share more information on coverage for providers.
3. Online provider directories and databases like those highlighted in the following chart list several health care providers that can be filtered based on specific needs.

### Black- and Hispanic/Latinx-affirming Provider Directories and Databases

Resource	Source	Searchable By:				
		Description	Provider Type?	Location?	Insurance/ payment type?	Other filters
<a href="#">Melanin &amp; Mental Health Directory</a>	Melanin & Mental Health	Directory of Black and Hispanic/Latinx health care providers	Yes, including therapists, psychiatrists, psychologists and treatment centers	Yes	Yes, also offers sliding scale filter	Treatment modalities, appointment types, issues, age range, language, clinician ethnicity/race
<a href="#">Hispanic/Latinx Therapy Directory</a>	Latinx Therapy	Directory of Hispanic /Latinx therapists in individual and group private practice	Therapists only	Yes	Yes, also offers sliding scale filter	Specialties, LGBT+ therapist, migration background, session type, cultural identities, age of client(s), immigration evaluations
<a href="#">Therapy for Hispanic/Latinx Directory</a>	Therapy for Latinx	Directory of Hispanic / Latinx mental health care providers	Therapists only	Yes	Yes	Age of client, availability, gender, identity, language, office features, services, sexuality, specialty, spirituality, treatment approach

## Black- and Hispanic/Latinx-affirming Provider Directories and Databases

Resource	Source	Description	Searchable By:			
			Provider Type?	Location?	Insurance/ payment type?	Other filters
<a href="#">Therapy for Black Girls Directory</a>	Therapy for Black Girls	Directory of Black mental health care providers	No	Yes	Yes, also offers sliding scale filter	Specialty, virtual therapy, group therapy, accepting new clients, prescribes medication
<a href="#">Therapy for Black Men Directory</a>	Therapy for Black Men	Directory of Black mental health care providers	Yes	Yes	Yes	Online sessions, gender, specialties, type of therapy, modality, age
<a href="#">Migrant Health Center Map</a>	National Center for Farmworker Health	Interactive map of health centers providing care to farmworkers and other migrant populations	No	Yes	No	

## LGBTQ+ Affirming Provider Directories and Databases

Resource	Source	Searchable By:				
		Description	Provider Type?	Location?	Insurance/ payment type?	Other filters
<a href="#">LGBTQ+ Healthcare Directory</a>	GLMA: Health Professionals Advancing LGBTQ+ Equality and the Tegan and Sara Foundation	Directory of self-identified LGBTQ+ and affirming providers	Yes, including addiction medicine physicians and mental health care	Yes	Yes	Framework, including trauma-informed, weight-inclusive, and harm reductionist providers
<a href="#">The Outlist LGBTQ+ Affirming Healthcare Provider Directory</a>	OutCare Health	Directory of affirming health care providers	Yes	Yes	No	Keywords
<a href="#">National Queer and Trans Therapists of Color Network Directory</a>	National Queer and Trans Therapists of Color Network	Directory of queer and trans people of color mental health practitioners; entries are reviewed by directory staff before being listed	No	Yes	“Accepts sliding scale” option	Accepting new clients, provides telemedicine
<a href="#">LGBT Health Clinics by State and City</a>	Centers for Disease Control and Prevention	Non-filterable list of health clinics for LGBT people by state and city	No	Yes	No	No

## Free, Affordable and Sliding Scale Clinic Directories and Databases

Resource	Source	Description	Searchable By:			
			Provider Type?	Location?	Insurance/ payment type?	Other filters
<a href="#">FindTreatment.gov Database</a>	Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration	Searchable directory of substance use and mental health care treatment facilities	Yes	Yes	Yes	Wide range of filters available to filter by services and payment options
<a href="#">Addiction Industry Directory</a>	National Association of Addiction Treatment Providers	Directory of licensed addiction service providers	Yes	Yes	Yes	Treatment type, clinical approach, specialty, recovery support services, types of payment assistance available, payment options, language services
<a href="#">Find a Health Center Searchable Map</a>	Health Resources and Services Administration	Searchable map and database of federally funded health centers that are required to adjust their fees based on family size and income	No	Yes	No	Website and tool are available in multiple languages
<a href="#">National Association of Free and Charitable Clinics Find a Clinic Directory</a>	National Association of Free and Charitable Clinics	Database of providers offering a range of medical, dental, pharmacy, vision and/or behavioral health services for no charge or on a sliding scale	Provider types listed, but not searchable by provider	Yes	No	



## Free, Affordable and Sliding Scale Clinic Directories and Databases

Resource	Source	Description	Searchable By:			
			Provider Type?	Location?	Insurance/ payment type?	Other filters
<a href="#">Certified Community Behavioral Health Clinic (CCBHC) Locator Map</a>	National Council for Mental Wellbeing	Interactive map and PDF directory of CCBHCs, which provide a comprehensive range of mental health and substance use services and are required to provide care regardless of ability to pay or insurance status	No	Yes	No	
<a href="#">Database of hospitals registered with Medicare</a>	U.S. Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services	Hospitals that accept Medicaid are required to provide certain types of care regardless of ability to pay or insurance status	No	Yes	No	
<a href="#">Health Care for the Homelessness Grantee Directory</a>	National Health Care for the Homeless Council	Interactive map of health clinics funded to provide care to people experiencing homelessness	No	Yes	No	

### Final Note

Everyone deserves access to health care from providers who make them feel safe and celebrated for who they are. Though finding affirming providers isn't always easy, resources like these can help you in the process. Remember that it's okay to seek out and advocate for care that meets your unique needs and identities, and you can always stop seeing a provider if they do not meet your needs or respect your identities.

# References

1. Dawes, H. C., Williams, D. Y., Klein, L. B., Forte, A. B., Gibbs, D. J., Wood, B., Hirst, L. E., Hall, W. J. (2023, September 15). Experiences of queer people of color in mental health care and substance use treatment: A systematic review. *Journal of the Society for Social Work and Research*, 14(3), 721-755. doi:10.1086/721454
2. McGregor, B., Belton, A., Henry, T. L., Wrenn, G., Holden, K. B. (2019, June 13). Improving behavioral health equity through cultural competence training of health care providers. *Ethnicity & Disease*, 29(Suppl 2), 359-364. doi:10.18865/ed.29.S2.359
3. Paschen-Wolff, M. M., DeSousa, A., Paine, E. A., Hughes, T. L., Campbell, A.N.C. (2024, January 3). Experiences of and recommendations for LGBTQ+-affirming substance use services: An exploratory qualitative descriptive study with LGBTQ+ people who use opioids and other drugs. *Substance Abuse Treatment, Prevention and Policy*, 19(1), 2. doi:10.1186/s13011-023-00581-8
4. Health Policy Institute. (n.d.) *Cultural competence in health care: Is it important for people with chronic conditions?* Georgetown University McCourt School of Public Policy. <https://hpi.georgetown.edu/cultural/>

*This project is supported by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) as part of a financial assistance award totaling \$1,500,000, with 100% funded by CDC/HHS. The contents are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily represent the official views of, nor an endorsement by, CDC/HHS or the U.S. government.*