

FOR PARENTS OF GAY CHILDREN

Can We Understand?

THE INITIAL SHOCK

When You First Find Out

It is often a shock for parents to find out that their child is homosexual. Whether you are a mother or a father, whether you have a son or a daughter, whether you long suspected something of the kind, or were completely surprised, finding out for sure can be a shock.

The feelings that shake you are very strong and confusing. You may hardly be able to talk about it at first without tears and anger.

Every family is different and every case individual: one parent may find out by chance, another may be told face-to-face, a third may receive a phone call or a letter; the child may be a teenager or an adult, self-accepting or upset with what he or she is; parents may be ready to listen, or react by drawing back.

For all, however, there are some underlying concerns and questions:

COMMONLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Parents Usually Want to Know:

Q. Why did he or she have to tell us?

A. Many parents think that they would be happier if they didn't know. What you must realize, however, is that if you did not know, you would never really know your child. A large part of his or her life would be kept secret from you, and you would never really know the whole human being.

The fact that your son or daughter told you is a sign of his or her love and need for your support and understanding. After all, who should know if not you? No other minority is asked to hide from their own parents what makes them "different"!

Q. Why did he or she do this to us?

A. Many parents feel bitter resentment at the fact of their child's homosexuality. This feeling is based on the assumption that being homosexual is a matter of choice and that this was a conscious decision, perhaps even made to hurt them. In fact, homosexuals do

not choose their sexual orientation. They simply are what they are: homosexuality is their true nature.

The only choice most lesbians and gays have is whether to be honest about who they are or hide it. Hiding it imposes a tremendous burden. It means living a lie, day in and day out. What parent would want a child to have to live that way?

Q. What did we do wrong?

A. Most parents feel guilt when they first find out. Psychology and psychiatry have told us for years that the way the child turns out is the parent's "fault." In fact, no parent has that much power over a child. Homosexuals are found in all types of families with all types of backgrounds.

No one knows as yet what "causes" any kind of sexuality, but it is widely accepted today that a child's sexual orientation is set at a very early age, if not at birth.

Q. Will he or she be ostracized, have trouble finding or keeping a job, or even be physically attacked?

A. We must answer: "Yes, unfortunately, these things are possible." It depends on where he or she decides to live, what kind of job he or she wants, how he or she decides to act.

But we must also say that attitudes toward homosexuals have been changing for the better and are more positive in many places.

Also, there are a growing number of groups (including P-FLAG) who are working for such a change, and who are ready to help those who have difficulties.

Q. Will he or she be lonely in his old age if he does not have a family of his own?

A. Maybe. But we must remember that this is very often true of all of us. Spouses die, marriages break up, children often live far away, and many young couples do not have children at all. Many of us have to adjust to loneliness when we are old. On the plus side, many lesbians and gay men develop long-lasting relationships, and the gay community is warmly supportive of its members. As it is becoming easier to "come out" -- that is, acknowledge their sexual orientation to themselves and others -- many homosexuals will have a chance to live as part of a community all their lives.

Lesbians and gay men include in their concept of "family" not only their blood relatives but their lifetime or long-term partners. There already exists an organization for elderly homosexuals called SAGE.

Q. Will he or she get into trouble with the law?

A. It is difficult to answer this question briefly since state laws differ. There is, however, a pamphlet published by the Lambda Legal Defense and Education Fund, Inc., which tries to answer the most frequent questions: *Gays and the Law, A Guide for Lay People*.

In more than half the states, legislatures or courts have decided that "deviant" sexual behavior between consenting adults in private is not a crime. However, even where it still is, most gays live their lives never having problems with the police.

Q. Should we send our child to a psychiatrist to be "cured"?

A. It is now generally acknowledged by the psychiatric community that homosexuality is not, as was previously supposed, a disease which can be cured.

In December 1973 the American Psychiatric Association declared that homosexuality per se is not a mental disorder or a disease. The American Psychological Association has taken the official position that it would be unethical to try to change the sexual orientation of a homosexual.

However, many people who are homosexual are so imbued with the prejudices of our society that they cannot accept their sexual orientation as normal. In these cases it is often helpful to get psychiatric or psychological help for the purpose of self-acceptance. Care must be taken, however, to select a therapist who is not himself or herself imbued with those prejudices.

YOUR CONCERNS FOR YOURSELF

Questions About Family, Friends...

Q. Should we tell the family?

A. Parents who are still struggling with their own acceptance of their child's homosexuality often worry about other people finding out. How can they deal with the questions the family is continually asking: "Has he got a girl friend?" "When is she going to get married?"

Our advice in such situations is: first and foremost, you must not confide in anyone unless you have your child's consent. It is his or her life you are discussing, and he or she has a right to decide who should know and who shouldn't.

Second, you should not tell anybody unless you yourself have reached the point where you are not defensive about it. It takes time to learn to accept your child, and unless you can be positive, you will communicate your unhappiness or doubt to others. When you are ready, you might find it easier to discuss it with one person at a time.

Q. What will the neighbors say?

A. This is a very real concern, especially for families who live in small communities where their whole social lives are dependent on the good will of the people around them. The answer to this question is much the same as the one above.

When you are secure in your own feelings, and informed about the subject, then you can talk about your child's sexual orientation with others and help them understand that prejudice against homosexuality is based on ignorance and fear.

Q. We have accepted the situation, but why must they flaunt it?

A. Often even parents who have accepted their child's homosexuality still protest at open behavior. It makes them uncomfortable and angry to see public displays of sexual attraction and affection between members of the same sex.

We suggest that this is a normal result of the way we have all been brought up and what we have been taught about sex in general, and homosexuality in particular. Although it is fully understandable, we must see it as our problem, and not as a problem for homosexuals.

If heterosexuals can display open affection in public, there is no logical reason why homosexuals should not. If you feel that sexual behavior should be a private thing, then this should apply to all.

Q. How can we learn to deal with this?

A. Maybe the best way to answer this is to let some parents speak for themselves. Here are two stories, one from a mother, the other from a father.

PARENTS TELL THEIR STORIES

Two Sons Are Gay

We have three sons, two of whom are homosexuals. When our eldest son was 18, he told us he was gay. My husband's response was simple: "Are you sure?"

I, on the other hand, had a great sense of guilt and failure, wondering where we had gone wrong. We have always been a close and loving family, and I worried whether the relationship with our eldest son would suffer as a result of his homosexuality.

I also had a great concern for his future happiness and well-being, as did my husband. I soon realized that our son was the same person I had always known and loved, but through his honesty I now knew more about him.

But understanding came later, after our son directed us to Parents of Gays. I no longer felt alone; new windows of understanding were opened by asking questions, listening and reading. It was a difficult but positive stage in my life, which took time and patience.

I am happy to say that today our family is as close as ever, but our relationship is more open and honest than before.

A Father's Story

How did I feel when I found out my daughter was a lesbian? It's hard to say. It was a mixture of feelings. My first thought was that life will be difficult for her. She is different and so therefore she would suffer the consequences of being different: suspicion, fear and rejection by the so-called normal world.

She would carry a label: dangerous and contagious, stay away, protect yourself! This made me feel sad at first, then angry, then protective. How could I help my daughter? I decided to learn more about homosexuality. Why does it happen? Can it be cured?

I later found out that the first question, to date, has no answer, the second is a fallacious one, because it is not a disease.

I read a lot, and that confused me. The opinions expressed by various authors, in some cases, differed drastically, based on their backgrounds and what they were trying to prove.

It was my daughter who directed my wife and me to Parents of Gays. It was then that I realized that I was not alone. The same feelings of guilt, inadequacy, and sorrow were shared by many.

There was one feeling I did not share. Some people were angry at their children for being homosexuals, since they felt that it had brought shame on them. Since my daughter has told us she's a lesbian and my wife and I have learned more about sexual orientation, we have become much closer to our daughter. Prior to this, there were times when she seemed distant, unhappy, at times impatient with us. This has all changed.

I could go on with many more details, but I think the statement my daughter made recently sums it all up: "Dad, I have never been as happy and relaxed as I am now that you know and understand."

IS IT A SIN?

How Religions View It

This is one of the most difficult questions for religious people. Many religions teach that homosexuality is condemned. But nowhere in the Bible is there mention of those whose true nature is homosexual.

Neither the Ten Commandments nor the Gospels mention homosexuality. Biblical scholars tell us that the oft-quoted (out of context) proscriptions in Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13 and St. Paul's Epistles Rom. 1:26-27, refer to male prostitution in the temples: sexual practices by heterosexuals.

We ask that you listen to priests, ministers and rabbis who have studied the question and have come up with other answers:

Catholic

"Because of the diverse conditions of humans, it happens that some acts are virtuous to some people, as appropriate and suitable to them, while the same are immoral for others, as inappropriate to them." -- *Saint Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologiae*

"Homosexuality has nothing necessarily to do with sin, sickness or failure. It is a different way of fulfilling God's plan . . . Supposedly, the sin for which God destroyed Sodom was homosexuality. That's the great myth. I discovered through scholarly research that it was not true. The sin of Sodom and Gomorrah was inhospitality to a stranger . . . In Matthew, Jesus says to his disciples: 'Go out and preach the Gospel and if you come to any town and they don't receive you well, if they're inhospitable, shake the sand from your sandals and it will be worse for that town than it was for Sodom.' . . . The four Gospels are totally silent on the issue of homosexuality." -- *John J. McNeill, SJ. in an interview with Charles Ortleb in the Journal Christopher Street, Oct. 1976.*

Protestant

"Do I believe that homosexuality is a sin? Homosexuality, quite like heterosexuality, is neither a virtue nor an accomplishment. Homosexual orientation is a mysterious gift of God's grace communicated through an exceedingly complex set of chemical, biological, chromosomal, hormonal, environmental, developmental factors totally outside my homosexual friends' control.

"Their homosexuality is a gift, neither a virtue nor a sin. What they do with their homosexuality, however, is definitely their personal, moral and spiritual responsibility.

Their behavior as homosexuals may be very sinful, brutal, exploitative, selfish, promiscuous, superficial. Their behavior as homosexuals, on the other hand, may be beautiful, tender, considerate, loyal, other-centered, profound.

"With this interpretation of the mystery that must be attributed to both heterosexual and homosexual orientations, I clearly do not believe that homosexuality is a sin." -- *Bishop Melvin E. Wheatley, Jr., Methodist, Retired, 11/20/81.*

For some thoughts from our Episcopal tradition see the separate page on

Some Episcopal Church thoughts and Statements

Jewish

"Above all else, Judaism has always stressed the importance and sanctity of the individual. The ancient rabbis likened each human life to the entire world. 'Why did God create each human being different, not stamping us out like so many coins?' asked the rabbis. 'To show us that each person is unique,' they answered.

"Judaism has always gloried in the individuality of human life, and it has always cherished freedom as the vehicle through which each unique individual can develop to his or her potential.

"It is for this reason, and because we Jews have learned first hand how stifling and destructive oppression is, that the Reform Jewish movement in all its branches has called for gay rights legislation and for loving acceptance of gay people.

"While all branches of Judaism do not agree, liberal Judaism recognizes that religious strictures against homosexuality were a product of their time and place, an ancient age in which existence itself depended upon each member of society having children to populate the frontier and the army.

"That was a long time ago, before modern science and psychiatry brought us new understanding of human nature. We Jews have always incorporated the latest knowledge in our Judaism. This adaptability is why we have survived, and why so many other Biblical prohibitions are disregarded.

"Thinking Jews today, indeed all thinking people, will refuse to invoke homophobic rules from among all these long-forgotten laws. After all, even the most Orthodox no longer stone disobedient children to death and fundamentalist Christians do not call for us to keep kosher, only two of the rules found in the Bible.

"If we Jews, always victimized for being different, are not accepting, who in God's name will be?" -- *Rabbi Charles D. Lippman, 1985.*

Is Homosexuality Unnatural?

Homosexuality is not unnatural since it exists in nature. It is just as natural for one person to be heterosexual as it is for another to be homosexual.

We don't know why people are homosexual, but we know that there always were, are, and will be homosexuals. It is estimated that 10% of the population in the United States and throughout the world is lesbian or gay; at least one member out of every four families.

For them, homosexuality is their true nature. To ask them to behave otherwise would be to ask them to behave unnaturally.

CONCERNS ABOUT AIDS

What We Know Now

We are all concerned about AIDS. Medical information about it is constantly changing as new discoveries are made. For reliable updates on the disease and its treatment call your State Health Department for Disease Control or local Gay Hotline which will give you local sources of information.

Not A Gay Disease

AIDS is not a "gay" disease. Lesbians, for example, are one of the safest groups in our society. It is a sexually transmitted disease which can also be spread by unsterilized needles. In Africa, the disease has attacked heterosexuals predominantly.

In the U.S., for reasons unknown, it spread first among male homosexuals. Recent studies have shown that it is now spreading among the heterosexual community as well. Infection through the use of unsterilized needles affects drug users in the U.S., and happens because of inadequate sterilization during medical care in Third World countries.

Nothing To Be Ashamed Of

AIDS is nothing to be ashamed of. It is not necessarily the result of leading a promiscuous life, and the fact that someone has acquired the disease says nothing about what kind of person he or she is.

The important thing is not how someone gets AIDS, but to deal with the fact that someone is sick and needs help.

AIDS Is Difficult To Get

There is nothing to indicate that AIDS is transmitted by any means other than those indicated above. Therefore there is no medical reason to shun members of your family who have AIDS.

Finally, the way a parent deals with AIDS must depend on the person with AIDS. Some will want to tell others; some will want to keep the information private.

Some will want their parents around; others will not. And some will want to talk to you about it while others will avoid talk. But keep in mind: all people with AIDS need love and care. To show our love and support is more important than ever.

Acceptance Takes Time

Accepting your child's homosexuality and educating yourself on the subject takes time. Sons and daughters often expect their parents to understand immediately, but many cannot do this. Do not be impatient with yourself, however long it takes. If you really want to learn and understand, you will.

Prepared by New York City Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays. Adapted with permission.