

Sexuality is not a choice

Shelley Argent





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This booklet is written with the intention of assisting parents, families and friends to gain more understanding of the fears, concerns and issues of young gays, lesbians, bisexual and transgender who are in the process of "coming out".



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What is PFLAG?

PFLAG stands for Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays.

PFLAG originated in the U.S. in 1979 following a human rights march. The first meeting consisted of 25 families plus friends of (LGBT) lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender who initiated the beginnings of PFLAG.

PFLAG is 100% voluntary support group that operates worldwide. In Australia, PFLAG has groups operating at different levels and strengths in most States. It is non-political and has no religious affiliations.

PFLAG understands all families have values, morals and beliefs that they have established and operate with the family unit. The information that PFLAG shares is of a generalist nature and will need to be evaluated by you - using your own belief system.

Aims

PFLAG aims to provide a support system for families and friends of lesbians and gays in their effort to understand and accept their children with love and pride. By doing this we believe we are strengthening the family unit within the community.

Not surprisingly many families are shocked, sometimes angry, embarrassed and sadly often homophobic. Our aims are to break down the barriers by education and support.

Objectives

Our objective is to keep the family unit together as much as possible and to create and understanding of the young person's needs while supporting parents in a caring manner.

How PFLAG assists parents

We do this by telephone support, which can be anonymous, written information, meetings with families individually if preferred, regular group meetings and buddy support. PFLAG is often the parents' first step when dealing with the issue of a lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender child.

How PFLAG assists youth

PFLAG assists young people by providing information to give parents immediately when they "come out". Plus, we provide information for themselves on how and when to "come out" to parents and friends. We also often meet with them individually to discuss "coming out" and the possible issues they may have to deal with. PFLAG also gives talks at support groups for young ones dealing with "coming out" issues.



Introduction

When I first became involved with Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG) I was shocked to find that it was particularly difficult to obtain reading material for parents about sexual diversity which would hasten their understanding of the problems and fears their child/children had to deal with. Plus, help them to understand their own fears about what was happening in the family unit.

I was also quick to realise that so often parents are reluctant to ask either at the bookshop or library for information because of shame and/or fear of themselves being "outed". And, so because of this I decided it was time to write my own which could then be passed on to parents seeking support.

I would not consider myself an author or "gay guru" but this booklet is a compilation of my personal thoughts, conversations with concerned parents, articles and the many books I have read on families struggling for education and eventual understanding.

Additionally, I believe I have also gained much insight and knowledge by talking to young people who are in the process of "coming out" and listening to them discuss their fears and concerns about telling family members. Plus, I have heard stories from many who have made the transition to live their lives as honestly as they can even if other family members are not accepting.

Parents of gay males and lesbians may be apprehensive about the questions and possible gossip. But it should soon become clear to readers that this is the least complicated of sexual diversity for family members to deal with even though at the beginning of the process it may not seem this way.

Not surprisingly, for the transgender and his/her families this can be very difficult to understand. They not only have their sexuality questioned, but they have to endure operations to make the physical changes and probing into their personal lives often by insensitive medical practitioners to ascertain their emotional and psychological strengths. They also have to endure stares, derision and

possible rejection not only by many people in society but very often by their own family members just so they can be how they see themselves.

I have heard stories from many transgenders who have endeavoured to live their lives honestly while talking about having to leave their homes and the safety of family networks because of homophobia and prejudice.

In this edition I have added two other sexual orientations, bisexuality which can be most confusing for not only the individual initially, but also for family members and finally heterosexuality. Some may question why I would bother to include heterosexuality when it is considered the norm. But it is my belief that heterosexuality like homosexuality or bisexuality it is just another orientation.

Also in this booklet I have included information to assist parents and partners' of married gays who have "come out". Not surprisingly, this again can be quite devastating and confusing for all concerned. Very often the straight partner struggles on silently in pain because of shame and blame and parents feel quite shocked and lost, totally unable to comprehend what has happened and why. This group not only deals with the issue of sexuality but also the problem of divorce.

As parents it is important to remember love should not be conditional. We loved our children before they told us they were gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender so how can we reject or alienate them when they need us the most? Sexuality is only a small part of each individual. However on saying this when our child first "comes out" it is all we can think of for quite a while.

I would not suggest this booklet has all of the answers, but it is a start and I do hope it helps to relieve some concerns. Parents should read as many books as possible to get a true understanding of their child's sexuality which will ultimately keep families united and keep healthy communication channels open.



When gay sons and lesbian daughters "come out"

Many parents, when first told the news that their son/daughter are gay have a variety of feelings including shock, disappointment, blame, anger, disbelief and abhorrence. Others feel guilt and concern with telling friends and relatives. It doesn't matter even if parents suspect - to have confirmation from your child is still heartbreaking for some. Regardless of our feelings we need to always keep in mind that homosexuality is neither the child's nor parent's fault.

Parents need to be aware that emotions at this time can and generally do swing wildly, often between anger and tears. Parents need time to digest the news that their child is gay. It's important to realise it isn't the end of the world. No one is to blame for a child's sexuality and as parents of gay children, our parenting skills should not be questioned.

Feelings of confusion

Another concern for many parents is they are fearful their child will be lost to them in a culture they (the parents) don't understand. However this need not be the case if patience and tolerance are practiced between parent and child.

Don't be surprised if initially your child feels like a stranger to you. This usually happens because the child isn't fitting the mould planned by parents. Many parents believe they knew everything about their child. However, the announcement of them being gay, proves this belief untrue. Generally, parents just need an explanation of the issues involved, patience and time to recover.

This is also a time when parents may behave badly saying things they may later regret due to their confusion and shock. A child's "coming out" is also harder for parents to comprehend when they have had boy/girl friends, a baby or been married.

- As parents we need to be aware that to feel shock is O.K. when the gay son/daughter breaks the news.
- As a parent we need to be aware that it is O.K. to cry some parents cry frequently. Just don't do it too often in front of the child as it may cause him/her to feel guilt. Remember it isn't his/her fault.
- As a parent it is O.K. to feel homosexuality is not the norm for us. But we must be aware it is the norm for our son/daughter.
- As a parent it is not unreasonable to have fears about HIV/AIDS, discrimination and ostracism etc.

Parental love should not be conditional. However, acceptance can take time. Sometimes, children expect us to accept their sexuality immediately. This is where the child needs to be patient and tolerant, because for most parents this is not possible. But, if you/we really want to learn and understand, we will. Then we will have a stronger, more honest relationship with our son/daughter.

Another issue causing stress for parents at this time, is that they are trying to deal with their own swinging emotions because of this unexpected news while still trying to be supportive of their child. Simultaneously, the gay child may be in fear of rejection and is looking for reassurance that we still love and accept him/her. Other children expect parents to calmly accept the news and rejoice for them. Sometimes, the young ones don't understand what the parent's "problem" is. They don't realise that it took them a long period of time to come to this realisation and their parents also need time to accept their news.

"Coming Out" can be a traumatic time for the gay person and sometimes it seems more traumatic for the parents. Of course parents need time to process the "coming out" of their child. Parents have many unanswered questions and fears about a sexuality they generally know very little about. Parents' beliefs and values are also challenged during this time. Homosexuality, unlike colour, race or creed is the only culture to which parents and children generally do not belong together.

Parents wonder why their child is gay

Most parents wonder when their child first "comes out" why he/she is gay. What happened? But we need to realise sexuality is like eye colour, height, shoe size, left/right handedness - we have no say; they/we can not choose.

Interestingly, some parents go into the closet, just as their child emerges. However the biggest problems for families when dealing with this issue, are homophobia, misinformation and ignorance from a society that very often doesn't understand any sexuality. How many parents can honestly say they felt comfortable discussing the "facts of life" with their children? Or, how many have given books to their children on this topic and told the child to come back if they have any questions, hoping there were none? So how can these parents who don't feel comfortable discussing their own sexuality, begin to understand, feel comfortable and accept homosexuality easily?

Many parents grieve

Many parents strive to be understanding and supportive, but feel this is a grieving period. They grieve the loss of the traditional lifestyle, the loss of their dreams and expectations for their child. I have met with many parents who have just sat with tears rolling down their face. When asked why they are crying they said they really couldn't explain except to say they felt like the child they knew was gone and before them stood a stranger. Others feel like a death has occurred. This is a sad time - these are feelings not felt with anger or loathing, just confusion and a great feeling of loss. But fortunately these feelings do pass.

Realistically, the child is still the same person he/she was the day before you were told of his/her sexual difference and we need to keep reminding ourselves of this. Parents, like their children, go through the "coming out" process differently - some quickly and some slowly. There are no clear rules. So parents and child need to be tolerant of each other during this time. I have met parents who accepted their child's sexuality virtually immediately and others who have taken years.

Why is my child gay?

uite often when I am talking to parents of gay children they look for reasons for their child's homosexuality. Some wonder if there was hidden abuse somewhere in their early life. Did Dad not play enough football or cricket? Was Mum too dominant in the household? Others wonder if it is a phase the child is going through? Often, parents wonder if it is possible their gay child was influenced by their partner? Many parents don't realise their child may have already experienced the "gay scene" before making their announcement.

Some parents believe that when their son/daughter "came out" to them, their child was just angry with them and trying to punish them. Others believe they were just confused, that it's just sexual experimentation and with maturity they will again become "normal". This belief can not definitely be ruled out. But, generally the child has thought about his/her sexuality for quite a while and has not taken this decision lightly.

Often when gay people are asked "when did they know they realise they were gay" many answer "from an early age", while others answer "around puberty". Most didn't know the words to explain being gay, but they knew they were different.

It is interesting to know that conservatively 3-5% of the population is gay, that is, having regular sex with same sex partners only. So there are many parents in society quietly asking the question, "what did we do wrong?" and the answer is "nothing".

Is our promiscuous society to blame?

Many parents when "blaming" choose to blame society and all of its flaws. They believe, if there weren't such freedoms as there is today, this would not have happened to their child. By assuming this, parents are underestimating their child's intelligence and character. I believe we are better off in a freer society, where our children can be honest about their lives and live openly and honestly. Who, when thinking rationally, would want their child to live their entire life a lie and possibly very unhappily.

Why can't they suppress their sexuality?

Some parents wish their child could suppress their homosexuality. This is often so parents can save face with the relatives and neighbours or personal religious convictions. But is this fair? Parents should try to place themselves in their child's shoes and consider if they could suppress their natural sexuality and live a homosexual lifestyle. Could they do it? No, I don't think so, because it isn't natural to them, just like heterosexuality is not natural for many young ones. Suppressing a natural instinct is much easier said than done and can be very destructive in the long term.

Others misguidedly argue it is an easier lifestyle their child has "chosen". But we must ask the question, "how can it be easier?" There can be fears of bashing, harassment, discrimination and rejection by family and friends. There is also the issue of relationships. Gay couples can not show affection in public like heterosexual couples for fear of scorn by the public around them. Gay relationships do not have the same legal recognition as heterosexual married or de facto couples. Plus there is the general wariness or non-acceptance by peers in the workplace. Because of these and many more reasons many gay people either move away from family or live quietly closeted lives in suburbia.

The latest theory of homosexuality

Many parents wonder about their child's sexual orientation. I hear people comment that "you never used to hear about homosexuals; there seems to be more around these days". True, "homosexual" didn't become a word until 1889. "Homophobia" didn't become a word until 1972, perhaps that explains why there are "more" today. Homosexuals have been around since the Pharaohs of Egypt. Homosexuality was even documented by anthropologists with the American Indian tribes. It seems they were the protectors while the hunters were away, which assisted with the survival of their kin.

The most recent theory about homosexuality is explained in two books, one titled "Brainsex" by Moir and another called "Sex on the Brain" by Deborah Blum. Both are very good and help to explain the function of the brain and theories relating to homosexuality. A third book by Alan Pease has a chapter which very simply explains homosexuality, in "Why men don't listen and women can't read road maps".

Basically, the theory is that when the pregnancy has progressed for about six weeks, a hormonal wash flows over the foetus and if they are the "wrong" hormones flowing, the baby is very likely to be gay. Some believe this occurs if the mother is stressed, sick or on medication. Research shows parents unknowingly have six times the possibility of having a gay child, because stress, sickness and medication can suppress or reduce the testosterone needed. However, it should be recognised no blame is being apportioned with this theory. Most women aren't even aware they are pregnant until at least six to eight weeks and by this time the deed is done.

Hamer, a geneticist believes there is also a possible genetic link to sexual orientation, though not necessarily a "gay gene". He argues that although a person is not necessarily born gay, there is a strong possibility a person will become gay. Others believe homosexuality is inborn. While others believe the child's orientation is decided by the time the child is five years old.

All agree the environments our children are raised in play a very small role in establishing a person's sexuality. Research also shows that for the parents who recognise their child may be gay early in life, it is pointless to try to either masculinise or feminise the child. It can only cause harm and will not achieve what that parent is hoping for, a heterosexual child.

Examples of how testosterone affects the unborn include research in which female canaries, if they are given testosterone while still an embryo, will be great whistlers, just like the male canary. Another example is that of female rats injected with testosterone while in the womb - they tend to be much more aggressive and will try to mount other female rats. This is because testosterone affects the wiring to their brain and therefore their capabilities.

Many believe homosexuality is strictly a human behaviour, but studies show all species have some members who have a homosexual orientation. Sheep are the best example. Gay rams were put into a pen with ovulating ewes and showed no sexual interest. So, the ewes were injected with extra hormones to interest the gay rams. Still nothing happened. Finally the gay rams were removed, straight rams were introduced to the ewes and they were very happy. The gay rams were put with other gay rams and they were also very happy.

Whether we believe the above theories or not doesn't really matter very much. What is most important about our child's sexuality is their knowing we accept

them, love them like we did before we knew they were gay and that we are now standing beside them.

Sadly, this isn't always the case. Often times, parents do not realise the stress and anguish young people feel during the process of revealing their homosexual orientation and "coming out". Young ones are very aware the risk they are taking in losing family and loved ones with their revelation. Most realise they are causing their family at minimum disappointment and at worst shame and disgrace and that they are risking the possibility of being thrown out of home. Therefore, they can never be sure of the reaction physical or emotional they will receive when telling parents.

Stress for the gay person in the family

Family members can sometimes be the gay family member's worst enemy. Often times, the gay or lesbian youth who has "come out" face more ridicule, physical and verbal abuse than other family members while still living at home. Regardless of why this happens - whether this be through fear, guilt, shame or homophobia - the abuse still occurs.

One concern of caring parents is the possibility of self-destructive behaviour and the fear of the gay youth moving into a hazardous lifestyle. This can happen when they don't receive the necessary support. Often times this behaviour stems from fear or low self-esteem caused by family and societal attitudes because he/she is gay. To prevent this from happening parents and family members need to reassure the gay youth they are still equally valued and respected, and let it be known the family is not ashamed of their gayness. Young ones can also accept potential abuse easier from outsiders if they know they are accepted and supported at home.

One self-destructive behaviour is substance abuse. Sometimes peer pressure and experimentation is the cause. But, often times our young ones believe drugs help to temporarily dull pain and escape hostility. Fear of rejection and a lack of understanding by family members can sometimes be the other reason for abusing drugs and alcohol.

Suicide is another big issue for many young gay people in the process of "coming out". The most dangerous age it seems is between 15 and 25 of years of age, when most people are questioning, or coming to terms with their

sexuality. This is because they can't cope with the huge pressures and again, fear of rejection by family and friends in a homophobic society. Also the feelings of hopelessness and confusion are huge contributors to suicidal intentions.

I love you but

Many times, parents believe they have "assured" their child that are loved and accepted. But, then proceed to tell the child they are not to tell anyone of their sexuality. This can be very stressful and disempowering for the young person, stopping them from being honest with the world. Plus it can cause strong resentment and arguments in the family. It always makes me believe that these parents see their child as the "dark family secret". People need to ask themselves "how can they honestly believe they accept the child, but won't be honest about the child." They don't realise they are subtly telling the child they are ashamed of them.

People like to rationalise keeping the secret in many ways. Some use the logic people didn't ask about his/her sexuality. Others rationalise it wasn't their place to say anything. Some feel they don't need to explain, rationalising it is nobody's business. This is reasonable as long as they aren't fearful of people finding out. Many believe if they tell family and friends, they will then be accused of being a bad parent and so they sink into martyrdom.

Families are invisible

Another problem for parents dealing with "coming out" issues is their invisibility. This is because of people not being well informed about homosexuality, plus the concerns of bigotry, shame and homophobia which intimidates many families. Another issue is the overwhelming feeling of isolation for the parents who are trying to understand and help their gay children, but not knowing where to turn for assistance, understanding, education and guidance. As many parents are aware it is very difficult to find helpful reading in bookshops or libraries on the issues we are faced with, and many people are too embarrassed or ashamed to ask the assistant for help.

Discrimination from within the family

One rebuff for the gay child is when parents don't want to meet or include their gay child's partner and friends at family and social functions. Often times they just pretend there is no partner and won't even ask after their well being. Then the parents wonder why the gay child doesn't want to attend family functions. Others "accept" the gay child's partner but are concerned they will "flaunt" their sexuality in public or around family and friends, which will shame or embarrass them. Does "flaunting" mean a touch, a hug, or a kiss hello or goodbye? If this is so heterosexuals "flaunt" all of the time. Showing affection to someone you care about is just a natural human behaviour, a sign of caring. It shouldn't be seen as something distasteful. Why should our gay children have to pretend when our straight children can be themselves?

Other parents use the excuse that homosexuality goes against their "principles" whether they be moral or religious, and so refuse to discuss in anyway or acknowledge their son's/daughter's homosexuality. Older parents often use the reasoning that it is their age group that is the problem. What happened to "older and wiser"? Lack of understanding with parents is not age-related - parents of all ages have similar problems coming to terms with their son/ daughter's sexuality. Parents need to ask themselves how would they feel if they were rejected, abused or abandoned by the people they love most, when they need them most, because of something they can not help, have no control over or did not choose.

Parents should want and encourage their gay children to be proud of themselves. This encourages them to be more confident and self-assertive, which would cause our gay children to have fewer long-term problems instead of being concerned about what the neighbours and relatives will say. Parents need to recognise their children need their support and encouragement to lead the best life they can. Sure it isn't what we as parents would have planned, but it is the life for our children.

We all need acceptance

Our gay children need acceptance, just like our straight children, and parents need to be aware that if we want to keep our children's love and respect we need to respect them totally. As parents we should aim to get as much information as possible to understand the issues our gay children are dealing with. Be open and honest about our children, and let them know we care. Reassure them aware they are not the "dark family secret". It is not easy when we are first told that our child/children are gay and as parents we have many issues to struggle with, but our children need to know that while we are struggling we still love and care for them and together we will succeed.

How fathers deal with the issue of a gay child

There are no rules. All fathers react differently when told their child is gay. Initially some may cry, feel huge disappointment, some may be abusive, and others may try to pretend the issue of homosexuality has not arisen. There is a great range of emotions fathers feel, when dealing with the issue of homosexuality in the family. Fathers come to terms with their child's sexuality and the time for acceptance varies. Age, culture and education seem to be irrelevant when a son/daughter comes out.

I would like to make the comment early in this section that I am not suggesting all fathers lack understanding and are only concerned about their own issues. There are many wonderful fathers who are proud and supportive of their gay children. This is written with the intention of acknowledging fathers' fears, concerns and negative feelings. Fathers, who are still coming to terms with their son/daughter being gay, need to know their feelings are not uncommon and need not be permanent. As parents we need to be permitted our questioning and self-pity. Because the news often comes as a real shock, we need time to come to terms with the issues and develop an understanding. This is all done at an individual pace.

I am writing this in the hope that fathers will read this section because they are the parent who rarely asks for help and support.

The many mothers I talk to often get little support from the father because he goes "into the closet" when the son/daughter "comes out of the closet"

Fathers usually have more problems and different problems than Mothers when dealing with the issue of a gay child. Many can not comprehend a different sexuality and have problems dealing with the many issues involved. Some deal with the homosexuality issue by "not dealing with it" - they refuse to speak about it and pretend it's all a bad dream.

Fathers often slot this unwelcome news away in the back of their brain and refuse to unlock the compartment where this information is stored, therefore believing they will never have to deal with the issue. The sad part is this makes it difficult for other family members and the gay person to have open and honest discussion, thus alienation often occurs.

Many men seem uncomfortable discussing their own heterosexuality, let alone homosexuality, unless either are in the form of jokes or a light hearted manner. Sexuality education is also often left to Mum to discuss with the children. And, so when a child comes home and announces he/she is gay (especially the son) Dad is often more confused than Mum and often more ignorant of concerns, feelings and issues involved. Sometimes his only concern is the perceived personal insult to his manhood.

Fathers often feel:

- their ego has been bruised
- they can't brag about their son's exploits
- less of a man because they have fathered a gay child
- the need to blame others, it can't be their fault
- it was their mother's fault because she over protected or dominated the son
- they were poor parents and didn't play enough sport
- they didn't make the child play more sport
- a gay child is an insult to their manhood
- people will judge them personally
- confused
- shame
- they have failed as positive roles for their son/daughter.

There can also be huge issues for families with cultural issues eg. Greek or Moslem cultures.

There are no rules as to how a father must feel when told of their child's homosexuality. However it should be noted that the previous comments are some of the common feelings experienced. It should also be noted that these feelings are not restricted just to Fathers. Often times, Mothers can feel similar.

Homosexuality is nobody's fault

What fathers need to understand is that homosexuality is no person's fault. People have no choice. They are still the same person they were before their homosexuality was confirmed and they still love you and need your support.

We as parents need to be aware that the person's "coming out" was not done as a form of punishment because we didn't give them enough attention when they were children. Homosexuality is also not a faze that the young adult will out grow. As a parent this is/can be a difficult time and can sometimes test the family unity and strength.

Will my child get HIV/AIDS?

This is one of the greatest early fears for parents who are trying to support their gay son/daughter while still looking for reassurance and answers. Fortunately, these days in Australia with the education campaigns that continue to be developed through the Queensland AIDS Council and other health agencies, the message of safe sex and harm minimisation is getting through.

In Queensland during 2000, there were 18 females and 79 males diagnosed with HIV. However, these statistics do not necessarily mean the people contracted HIV in Queensland - it was just diagnosed here. This information shows that education campaigns have been working. However, people still need to practice safe sex. World wide, HIV is predominantly a heterosexual disease. In 2001, the World Health Organisation reported that approximately 45 million people were living world wide with HIV/AIDS. However, in Australia and New Zealand only twelve thousand people have HIV/AIDS and in Queensland there are only twelve hundred cases. If our children practice safe sex and, if they use drugs they always use clean needles, this disease should never become an issue for them.

Recent statistics show a huge drop in HIV/AIDS related deaths, due to the incredible improvement in medication for people with HIV. However, when a

person decides to be on the medication they need to be vigilant about taking the correct dosage at correct times. Thankfully, most people with HIV are now living longer healthier lives which is wonderful.

Homophobia

One definition for homophobia is ignorance and an unrealistic fear of another person's sexuality.

I once read an article stating gay youth pays the highest price when it comes to homophobia. This happens when they are emerging into adulthood. The gay youth realise he/she is different in what can be considered a socially acceptable manner and therefore are beaten or teased by others who also recognise the difference. I believe homophobia is largely responsible for a high suicide rate among the gay community because of fear, ridicule and rejection.

Unfortunately, homophobia carries into adulthood. The article also stated that boys and men are kept in line by homophobia, because if males step outside the boundaries of masculine behaviour they are immediately faced with verbal and possible physical abuse whether they be gay or not.

Homophobes argue that homosexuality is not natural, it's a perversion, it's against God's law and it's disgusting. Amazingly they haven't realised their beliefs and actions like "poofter bashing" (as they call it) are just as disgusting, against God's law and often perverted. Homosexuality is not natural for everyone, but it is natural for the gay person and their rights should be recognised and upheld.

Unfortunately for gay youth, homophobia can become apparent when parents are confronted with their son/daughter "coming out". One problem can be ingrained ignorance and hatred often taught to parents as children. Homophobia is demonstrated in family situations by rejecting the son/daughter, excluding gay partners from family events, and making nasty or insensitive comments.

Many people are genuinely ignorant about homosexuality. It is something they have had no need to have knowledge about and are probably unaware of even knowing a gay person. All they know about homosexuality are gay jokes and the look of the stereotypical gay person.

Because of homophobia in society, gay youth needs to know they at least have the support of family and friends. It really makes a difference.

Disadvantages of being homosexual

- can not show affectionate gestures to partner in public eg. holding hands.
- fear of being bashed
- same sex relationships have limited legal status
- discrimination and ostracism by society because of homophobia, fear and ignorance
- non acceptance of partner by friends and family
- no tax deductions because of "single" status and lack of legal relationship recognition
- no compensation for partners of same sex relationships regarding superannuation payouts, social security, health insurance etc.
- Same sex couples with children are not recognised legally as a "family".
- Gays have no automatic legal rights when partner is either incapacitated and can't speak for him/herself or dies.
- Same sex couples can't adopt children.
- Telling family members one is gay is very stressful and the person can face possible rejection from family members.
- Society is still not as accepting of homosexuality, as it should be, therefore making many gays feel living a closeted life is necessary.
- Often times, gay men and lesbians have to leave their home town, because of ridicule, fear and ignorance
- Sometimes young gay men and lesbians have to change schools because of being (or the fear of being) bashed, ridiculed and ostracised

This list can go on endlessly. How can people believe this is a sexual "PREFER-ENCE" when it is unlikely that anyone would "CHOOSE" a lifestyle with so many adversities. Most of our sons and daughters go on and make successes of their lives, but they need parental support and understanding to help them overcome the tough times because of governments slow to change and homophobia in society.

Homosexual myths put into perspective

- Homosexuals are not paedophiles. 95% of the men who are paedophiles are heterosexuals and very often married or in heterosexual relationships.
- Homosexuality is not a mental illness.
- Homosexuality is not a sin; generally your interpretation depends on how one understands the bible.
- Heterosexual men are much safer from homosexual men, than homosexual men are from heterosexual men, due to homophobic beliefs.
- Homosexuals are not all drug addicts. Just like heterosexuals are not all drug addicts.
- Homosexuality is not a choice, or fashion trend.
- Not all homosexual men are effeminate.
- Most homosexual men are not interested in wearing women's clothing.
- Homosexuality is neither revolting or disgusting. What is normal for one sexual orientation is not normal for the other.
- Homosexuals do not lack morals
- Homosexuality is not an option, just like heterosexuality is not an option.
- Lesbians are not all "butch" with a hair problem.
- Gays/Lesbians have not necessarily come from deprived or abusive homes, or homes have overbearing mothers.
- There are no more homosexuals today than there was 50 years ago. The difference is that now many feel less inhibited to "come out" and do not want to live their lives as lies, live with unhappy marriages or be secretive with their lifestyle.
- Homosexuality is not a phase the person is going through. By the time the person "comes out" they have carefully thought through the issues and the consequences.

- A relationship with the opposite sex will not change a homosexual orientation.
- Nearly half of heterosexual couples have had, or tried to have anal sex at least once.
- Lesbians are not necessarily "man haters".
- Many people have theories on why a person is homosexual. The reality is it doesn't matter why, they just "are".

Some homosexual truths

- they are nurses, police, politicians, teachers, carpenters, business people, engineers, students, plumbers, labourers etc
- they are part of families they are somebody's son or daughter, uncle, aunt, father, mother, cousin, nephew, niece or grand-child
- they pay taxes like every other person
- they come from all social classes, races, religions and cultures
- most live quietly in society and suburbia
- they have hopes, plans and dreams just like every other person
- they positively contribute to society in thousands of different ways
- they are caring, loving people who have feelings, need acceptance and love just like everyone else
- they are all ages
- their sexuality is only a small part of the total person
- they are the same person the day after they "came out" to you as they were the day before
- even if you don't realise, you probably know a gay man/lesbian and are unaware, because they don't wear signs advertising their sexuality
- they are caring human beings.



When your partner "comes out"

This chapter is written with the intention of assisting straight partners with some of the issues and concerns that help them come to terms with their partner's "coming out". It is also written with the assumption that the gay partner is male. Basically because of simplicity and studies tend to believe there are more gay males than females. Additionally, research shows that approximately 20% of males who participate in some form of homosexual acts will marry for various reasons, while most females prefer to remain single. Plus, more women are inclined initially to seek advice about their suspicions regarding the possibility of their partner being gay.

However, the problems for gay fathers and lesbian mothers are similar and just as distressing.

For those who suspect their partner may be gay

Some women suspect their husband may be gay, perhaps by finding gay magazines etc., while for others it may be a slow awakening by distant secretive behaviour or clues and for others no idea at all until they are informed. But it doesn't matter which category a wife sees herself in. The situation can be totally devastating.

When wives start to wonder and begin to ask questions it is not unusual for partners to initially deny the accusation. Eventually when the gay partner realises the wife is genuinely becoming aware, the man will usually admit his homosexual tendencies.

Issues and emotions of the straight partner

Shock and Grief

Initially, because of the shock of the disclosure many "straight" partners temporarily lose the inability to function eg. eat, sleep or properly care for the children. Thus begins a journey of great confusion, feelings of foolishness, being unlovable, self questioning, self esteem issues and feelings of isolation and loss of hope. This is sometimes described as the "grieving period". Some say it feels as if their partner has died. And, similarly the spouse wonders for a time how she will survive without her partner financially and emotionally.

Betrayal

Many straight partners experience feelings of betrayal, initially believing that the marriage was always a farce and feelings of anger being lied to, to cover up possible secret meetings or liaisons during the marriage. Many partners even feel betrayed because of the lack of honesty and not being given the choice about whether to marry when the gay partner was aware of their diverse sexuality prior to the marriage.

For many when the gay partner announces or admits their sexual diversity the straight partner feels confused and wary about who to confide in. Very often they are reluctant to reveal the true reason for the marriage breakdown which again adds to isolation and stress. So often the straight partner even though struggling to maintain some form of sanity and control also has concern for the gay partner realising that they are also confused and fearful of what will now happen.

This is a difficult time for everyone involved. The gay person may be experiencing feelings of guilt because they feel they have destroyed their family, plus there can be depression because of self loathing. Additionally, the gay partner could be fearful of losing the children, family and financial security that has grown throughout the marriage.

However while stating this some go through a period of initial euphoria because they can now be honest with the world. But often sink into depression and feelings of hopelessness when they realise their visions and plans are not going as they imagined.

The straight partner and family members involved with this type of dilemma need to understand that the gay partner did not necessarily feel they were deceiving their partner. They were just trying to conform to societal expectations. Whether, this be for religious reasons, family expectations or just wanting to be seen as "normal" or perhaps hoping that these "unwanted" feelings would go away.

Straight partners argue that it would have been preferable to have been told and given a choice about whether to still marry. However, if the gay person is self loathing about his feelings, there are probably going to be issues of denial, not admitting their fears to anyone, including themselves. Believing and hoping that once married everything will be o.k.

Plus, for others they may not have become aware of their homosexual tendencies until well into the marriage, which can be quite confronting for the individual.

Sometimes men who have admitted their homosexuality to the wife want to continue with a sexual relationship. Psychologists believe this is because even though he is gay he still wants to keep the relationship with his wife, hoping this will keep some normality in both lives. This emotion is not surprisingly very confusing for the wife.

Loss of trust

For some straight partners it isn't necessarily the issue of homosexuality or homophobia it is the issue of loss of a loved one and seeing the future alone, trust that seemed to be misplaced and the lack of honesty by deception and lies.

A common belief for many is the feeling of being tricked into a marriage that they now see as a farce. With many questions unanswered. They also feel abandoned having to explain to friends and family about the separation. Plus, the straight partner is generally is left with the children and their feelings of confusion. Very often this makes the abandoned partner angry because they feel the gay person now just moves on with their new life.

Another issue for the straight partner is the questioning or belief their sexuality has been rejected. This feeling can make a person feel very uncertain about their own sexuality, which causes self-doubt and self esteem problems.

Isolation

Isolation is another issue for the straight partner because they don't know where to turn for support, or who will understand their feelings and issues. Plus, there is the problem of keeping the secret, if this happens and many do, plus the issue of continued trust with the partner regardless of the path the relationship is now taking.

This is a very big issue. The straight partner, who usually feels angry and betrayed, wonders if they can ever trust the gay person or anyone else again. Because of the many lies told before to cover secrets, they seriously wonder where truth and lies begin and end.

A wife besides the typical feelings of repulsion, anger and confusion are concerned about sexually transmitted infections, HIV and the possible need for testing for herself, plus the how, when and where if the gay partner has had sexual encounters while still in the marriage.

Resentment and anger

It is quite common for the straight partner to have feelings of resentment and anger towards the gay partner's new life and prospective partners because they feel or know they won't be a total part of their partner's life. And, their expectations of growing old with this person is now gone.

The straight partner needs to understand that there is nothing, ABSOLUTELY NOTHING they have done or not done that encouraged, coerced or awakened these homosexual feelings in their partner.

The gay partner should be sensitive and helpful here by offering assistance with the children, acknowledging the partners pain and their attempts to keep life moving in a positive direction. Many gay partners can never appreciate the sacrifice and turmoil the straight partner is experiencing while trying to keep some form of family unity even if only temporarily until things stabilise.

If the couple want to keep the relationship in tact

People often feel that because the partner is gay they should automatically separate. But sometimes it may be preferable for a variety of reasons if the couple can come to an agreement and if it suits the family dynamics to stay as a family unit? However, each person needs to realise difficulties will arise and like any other relationship there needs to be boundaries and respect. And, like all relationships if they are to succeed, they need to be worked at by both parties.

The relationship has more hope of success if the straight spouse can understand the issues of homosexuality and bisexuality. Plus the straight partner needs to feel they has control over their life, plus decisions made, need to be of benefit to the straight partners interests and concerns. Not, just accommodating to the gay partner.

Obviously, this would be a non-traditional relationship but clear guidelines need to be defined and both people need to be prepared to adhere to their decisions. Time, patience and flexibility are necessary for any relationship to survive and this type or partnership is no different.

Unfortunately, most of these marriages do not survive long term, but consideration should be given if possible to make the transition easier either for the children, financial or emotional reasons for everyone involved. If divorce does occur it should not be seen as failure by either party especially when children are involved

For some couples who do try to keep the marriage together, honesty is a very important ingredient. Both parties need to be able to speak freely and discuss their feelings and the issues they are dealing with. Additionally, it is important for the straight partner to feel they are valued and an important part of the unit, not just the "keeper of secrets". For a marriage like this to succeed the straight spouse needs to have choices and input into the decision making and ground rules to make them feel comfortable.

The gay partner is also confused

As mentioned earlier some people are not aware of their homosexuality, while others are confused and suppress their feelings hoping a good secure marriage will halt any unwanted sexual feelings. Many feel extremely stressed and unhappy and don't understand why they are feeling as they do.

Unfortunately, many psychiatrists used to encourage men to marry believing a "good wife" would solve their problems. Not surprisingly, this advice eventually added to their problems. Because not only are the usual family members affected, but now there is also a wife, her family members and possible children to be considered. Plus, the added problems involved with a probable marriage break down.

When a person finally acknowledges or realises they are gay, they can be in great turmoil for a long time, sometimes becoming abusive and controlling, while others may seem distant or vague in their general behaviour. A common problem for most is severe depression because they don't want to be homosexual.

Additionally there are the usual feelings of fear, hopelessness and possible rejection of family and friends plus, the added problem of possible self loathing. Added to these concerns are the fears and uncertainties of all lesbians and gays when they first "come out".

The majority of gay partners don't set out to hurt their partners and family, they are also in pain with self loathing and fear. Plus, they have feelings of isolation with no person talk to, so like many people they just pretend it isn't happening. They also go into denial rationalising that it (homosexual activity) will never happen again.

Of all of the gay partners I have talked with each one genuinely loved or still loves the partner they married. It is just the stress of not being able to maintain the denial of feelings that are becoming overwhelming and the feeling they will explode if they continue with the heterosexual subterfuge.



To tell or not to tell the children

When telling children that a parent is gay it is usually best to be as honest and straight forward as possible. However when the news is fresh to the other straight parent and that parent is hurting, children can be told the news in the most damaging way both for the child and the gay parent. Which is not helpful to anyone involved plus it can cause the relationship to break down.

Often when the child is small it can be explained in a very uncomplicated manner. It can be as simple as Daddy still loves him/hesr but now lives with a man instead of Mummy and the child. As long as the child knows they will see Daddy regularly there is usually no long term trauma. The father can still have fun with the child and be part of their life, possibly take them for weekends and still be a proper parent to the child.

The world needs to understand that just because a parent makes their homosexuality know, it doesn't change the fact that they are still capable of being good parents. Gay parents can't convert or coerce their children into becoming homosexual themselves. Plus, it needs to be remembered they and their partners don't suddenly become perverts, promiscuous or child molesters. Research shows that 95% of child molesters are heterosexual males either married or in a relationship. They still love and care for their children just as much as they have always done.

Don't underestimate young children

Young children usually are very adaptable and see things in a simple straightforward manner. I believe it is best not to tell untruths because this is when confusion sets in and needless problems can arise. When parents separate for whatever reason there are always concerns with children fretting for the absent parent, but no more with the issue of homosexuality than any other reason for leaving.

With young children the problem is more with the other parent dealing with issues of abandonment, anger, confusion, betrayal and possible homophobic issues.

The abandoned parent can often cause huge problems for the child when Daddy leaves and they then begin to tell the child Daddy is bad, or his leaving is described in very negative tones. This only confuses the child more, because they don't see Daddy as bad, he is just not living at home. This can be a time when the child feels he/she has to choose one parent over another especially when the child is a little older and this just isn't fair.

Sometimes people fear the child will be damaged by the revelation of the one parent being gay. Generally, this only happens when there is bitterness and anger coming from the heterosexual parent. I believe small children handle the news better than many adults.

Older children may question their own sexuality

However, when the child is older and nearing or into puberty, there can be different problems, because the child will probably question their own sexuality and wonder if they may be gay or become gay later in life like Dad. Some become very confused, while others may be homophobic which is very common around puberty. This is usually because they don't want to be seen as different plus the need to fit in to their group. The news can sometimes cause them to be angry, ashamed or possibly reject the gay parent, at least for a time. This can be because they are fearful of others finding out and the possible rejection of them by their friends.

This is a stage when the child needs to be reassured they will not necessarily be gay just because a parent is. They need to be reassured homosexuality is not catching and they can't be coerced into being gay. And, most importantly they need to be aware that their father is still their father, it is nothing the parent did wrong and he still loves them as much as always.

But the parents should always quietly consider it is a possibility that they may have a gay child and so it very wise to have a gay friendly house. Do not denigrate a person because of their sexuality, because the child will get conflicting messages and could develop huge behavioural problems while they are trying to understand themselves. It needs to be remembered it is not a choice, they

are not "sick" they just "are". No matter how people might like to think we can halt a person becoming homosexual, it just isn't possible.

When children are told the news it is irrelevant whether they took the news calmly or angrily. This is a time of huge readjustment. Their image of their father may be different, their home life has altered and because of this there may be many unexpected issues and challenges they need to come to term with. Plus the values that they have been developing are being questioned and reassessed.

While saying this, the "coming out" parent needs to remain strong, confident and up front about their sexual orientation to their children. Children mirror their parents and so if the parent is embarrassed or struggling with their orientation then the children will also. It is recommended to display confidence and commitment to their new life, while constantly reassuring the teenager they are loved, wanted and won't be abandoned. Children like the rest of society need to understand that sexual orientation is not negotiable and should not be hidden. Teenagers want parents to accept their choices and decisions and so this thinking should be seen as a "two way street" not just when it is convenient.

However, parents need to be available to listen, calm their fears, explain their sexuality, and to move along at a pace that is comfortable for the child. It is not wise to pressure the child by putting them into situations where they are not comfortable eg. if Dad has a partner, don't push the child to meet him if he/she doesn't seem ready.

Parents need to remember that it took them quite a while to come to terms with their sexuality and to "come out" to family and friends. The child is the same. They need to think about what they have been told, come to terms with what it means to them, how it changes their life and how they will deal with the changes. So parents need to let the child know your love for them hasn't changed, be there for them, answer their questions as simply and honestly as possible and be patient.



When your married son/daughter "comes out"

For simplicity again I shall refer to the gay person leaving the marriage as the son, but the issues and fears are the same as if it was the daughter leaving. The only difference is sometimes the mother who "comes out" is able to keep custody of the children, which rarely seems to happen if it is the father who "comes out".

Not surprisingly, this is a most confusing time for parents, much more traumatic than when the child is single and "comes out". Not only do they have the sexuality issues of which most are ignorant but they also have the usual turmoil of the son/daughter's marriage breaking up.

When a person who is married announces they are gay, they are usually greeted with "How can this be, you are married". Parents need to understand that often the person marries, because they feel pressured by societal attitudes and believe that marriage will halt the "unnatural feelings" or "weird fantasies", they experienced as single males. Others have no idea until later in life. But eventually, the feelings become too much for many to ignore and because they are married more people are affected by the recognition of the person's homosexuality.

Some believe their "coming out" is a selfish act and they are not considering the family. But denial can cause depression, domestic violence and possible suicide just from the stress of trying to keep the secret. Worse if they quietly act upon their sexual urges without telling the wife there can be the risk of sexually transmitted infections for her. This can happen because the men are fearful that if the wife discovers condoms, when they don't use condoms for contraception or if somebody finds reading material on safe sex practices their secret will be out. Then the deception can make the hurt, anger and bitterness worse because the wife realises she may have been put at risk.

Confusion for everyone involved

A problem for many parents is they already have a daughter in law who is also confused and angry and dealing with her own issues because of this announcement. Plus they have added fears and concerns of how the children will cope with Dad leaving and the possibility of the daughter in law distancing herself from the family and taking the children with her. Unfortunately, some parents feel partly responsible because it is their son that has caused this pain, which adds to their stress.

Parents also have the concerns of added questions from relatives and friends asking about the marriage break down. Usually, there is much discussion about the "why and wherefore" with friends and when a marriage dissolves because of sexuality there are many unanswerable questions and wondering by everyone plus a hesitation to talk by those involved.

Not surprisingly there is great confusion and many questions. How could this be? Did you know before you were married? Have you had same sex partners? How long have you known? Are you in a relationship now? Then of course there are the usual questions nearly all parents ask themselves when they realise they have a gay child.

This is very traumatic time for parents. People can rationalise and make excuses if the son leaves for another woman, or if the couple argue, or if one is irresponsible, but most cannot comprehend leaving wife and children for a same sex partner. When any marriage ends and partners separate the family structure automatically changes and so does the image.

Of course for many parents there is the homophobia, repulsion, ignorance, shame and fear of not knowing will happen next. However this applies to everyone involved, but for parents of married gay men this cans be a particularly isolating time and many parents suffer from depression and guilt and helplessness.

Families need to understand the decision made by the gay person has not been taken lightly, and the decision to leave was/is not done because they are bored with the marriage or looking for a little excitement. However, what sometimes happens is the person behaves as if they are young and irresponsible and a little flamboyant for a while. This is because it is the first time in their

life they can be their true selves and it is quite an intoxicating feeling, but quite a shock to family members at the time.

Will we still have a relationship with the grandchildren

A huge concern for grandparents are the children and how they will handle the situation and will they as grandparents still have the contact that they have always had with them, especially long term. Grandparents worry about Christmas and birthdays and any family event that the children would normally attend.

A concern for many is if they haven't had a great relationship with the daughter in law she may not want to keep contact and then as grand parents they feel they have no rights. Some women feel anger towards the parents in law and feel they can punish the gay partner by distancing themselves from his family. Others may just feel it is too painful and a constant reminder of the absent partner when they visit in-laws.

Many people look long term and worry that the partner will eventually remarry and will they still have contact with the children and what if they move away. To some grandparents the fear of losing grandchildren is the worst scenario out of what seems a horrible mess. Many believe it is beneficial to the children to keep the regular pattern of life going if possible. And, the adults need to be mindful and sensitive to each others needs.

But like in any family when a person "comes out" regardless of their marital status time is needed for the grieving period and readjustment of all concerned. And as always, it is recommended to find as much reading material as possible to understand the issues that you are not alone.



Quick Tips for keeping LGBT children in the family

- when the child first comes out ask questions, don't sweep your child's sexuality under the carpet - this can be very enlightening and may answer many unasked questions
- 2. tell your child he/she is still loved and make them feel valued in the family unit this is a time when your child needs reassurance because they know you may be struggling with their sexuality
- 3. encourage your child to bring home his/her friends and get to know them
- 4. always include partners in family events if you don't your child may move away from the family and you don't want that to happen
- 5. ask about partners welfare when they are not with your child
- 6. take your child's relationships seriously
- 7. visit predominantly gay coffee shops and restaurants your child likes from time to time this lets them know you are comfortable with their sexuality
- 8. be interested in what your child is doing
- 9. avoid gay jokes and homophobic comments
- 10. let your child know that you want them in your life unconditionally
- 11. take part in gay friendly activities eg. see gay friendly movie or play with your child
- 12. talk to other parents with LGBT children



Heterosexuality

I have written this section with the intention of making people aware of how fortunate it is to be mainstream and how we need to step outside of our comfort zone when loved ones "come out". This is very important on our journey of gaining understanding and acceptance.

Heterosexuality is a sexual orientation just like bisexuality, or homosexuality. Admittedly, we believe it to be more common and therefore considered the norm.

But many heterosexuals (straights) myself included, have lived in a protected world unaware and uninformed about others with a diverse sexuality. That is, until our children, friends and sometimes partners or parents inform us their sexual orientation is no longer as we believed. This can be a very challenging time. It can be a period when family values need to be reassessed and stereotypical beliefs questioned which can be quite confronting for many.

When this happens many of us experience a huge reality check. It can be quite confronting because it blows away the stereotypical, homophobic opinions about "those" people.

We quickly realise that homosexuals, bisexuals and transgender are not as we joked about or imagined because our son, daughter, friend, partner or parent are now one of this marginalised group and they are ok. Not like we imagined one of "them" to be.

Unfortunately, many heterosexuals don't understand their own orientation properly and when something as simple as telling children the "facts of life" arises many parents give the child a book to read, telling the child to come back if they have any questions. So it is a huge shock and stressful time for many when diverse sexual orientation is disclosed. People just don't understand at all

Not surprisingly, because we live in a protected world and as stated earlier, many are not properly informed about other sexual orientations. The belief is

that it's ok to tell jokes and make insulting comments about the LGBT community. Often believing they don't rate as high on the scale of humanity as we do because of their perceived deviance, or we use the excuse "it" is just harmless fun

Choices

As heterosexuals generally, we need to realise that we didn't choose our sexuality and neither does anyone else regardless of their orientation. Unfortunately, many wonder why others just can't do the "right thing" and suppress their sexuality.

Perhaps, the same should be asked of us. If heterosexuality was NOT the norm could we suppress and alter our sexual orientation and embrace the one that is.

To do so is extremely difficult for those who do try to live the traditional life of marriage, mortgage and children. This causes great emotional stress, affecting not only the lives of the individuals but those who are closely connected also suffer emotional stress which can create dysfunction in families. Life would be much simpler if society accepted a person's sexuality from the beginning instead of trying to make them into something they are not.

Very rarely do parents cry or suffer stress when they realise their child/children are heterosexual. Heterosexuality is never questioned. Parents very rarely ask "are you sure?" It is just taken for granted. As a heterosexual we are not accused of flaunting our sexuality by holding hands in public. It is never suggested that we could/should abstain from sexual relationships, suppress our sexuality or not tell friends and family, because of shame or fear. It is never necessary for us to explain or justify our sexuality to family and friends.

Generally, society needs to understand we can no longer carry the belief heterosexuality is the "true" sexuality that "others" aren't natural, or considered deviant behaviour or an abomination.

Plus, we can no longer carry the belief that other sexualities are phases and fads, or those who are LGBT are mentally or emotionally unbalanced, because when it is our loved one, we know different.

We should always keep in mind heterosexuality is "normal" for heterosexuals but not necessarily for gay, lesbian, transgender or bisexual family members or friends.

In conclusion, it is interesting that when writing this chapter many heterosexuals felt challenged when asked their opinion. But, this section was written with the intention of not to criticise, or say one sexual orientation is preferable to another. My hope was to encourage people to think laterally and to see our sexuality from the perspective of a person with a different sexual orientation who may be constantly challenged or regularly asked to explain. And, to understand that for others to be gay, lesbian, transgender or bisexual is neither an easy or chosen path. Sexuality is like eye colour we cannot choose, but we can be accepting of others.



Understanding transgenderism

Many thanks to ATSAQ the Australian Transgender Support Assoc. of Qld. and Andrea for patience and assistance which enabled me to write this chapter for the booklet. There is little information for parents of transgender and again like parents of lesbians and gay males they need information to help them understand and support their children. This chapter is only the beginning of a long journey. Like all parents when faced with a dilemma like this we feel isolated and alone, but I hope it will give parents enough confidence to continue searching.

The first section of this booklet discussed issues and concerns parents of gays and lesbians have when their children first "come out". But a parent of a transgender has not only the sexuality issues, but the added stress of their child wanting to change their physical appearance of male to female or female to male. And, because of this change most parents have a huge adjustment.

It should be established very early that a transvestite is not a transgender. A transvestite is usually a heterosexual male that temporarily changes gender on the outside, but never on the inside. Reasons for cross-dressing can be sexual excitement, relaxation or to just to be free from rigid societal roles. Plus transvestites don't want surgery.

First we need to understand that to be a transgender is not immoral, selfish or be seen as a self centred act intended to gain attention from family or society. A transgender is an ordinary person with a medical condition. The medical condition is known as Gender Dysphoria or Gender Identity Disorder. This term is an accurate description of a condition related to the sense and expression of gender. We like to avoid the term "transsexual" because it sometimes has an emotional or sensational connotation to some people. Being transgender has nothing to do with sex or sexuality.

Gender Identity Disorder is a mismatch between the gender (masculine/feminine) they experience in the mind and the sex of their body (female/male). Both are healthy, just mismatched. Generally, it is believed the mix up came when the foetus was still in the womb because of incorrect hormonal flows. Others

argue that it could be environmental. What ever theory may one day prove to be correct, we need to remember that no person is to blame and it is not a choice or decision taken lightly by the person with the mismatch.

Approximately, one in twenty thousand people have Gender Identity Disorder, with equal numbers between male to female and vice versa. Society needs to be aware that the sex reassignment surgery is only physically changing the body to the opposite sex. The brain and the person psychologically will always be the same. We can not operate to change the brain, so altering the body is much easier. For parents coming to realise, understand and accept this about their child can be particularly challenging to their values and beliefs.

A problem for many parents is by the time their child informs them of their transgenderism, the person is well and truly ready to begin the "change". Generally, a transgendered person takes many years like the gay male or lesbian before they inform parents of their sexuality which is often the last step for them before beginning the merry-go-round of doctors, hormones, hair removal and living the lifestyle before beginning the operations to complete their transformation.

For a female to male transgender it seems they have less problems moving into society and are more invisible than many male to females. Not surprisingly, many parents have problems seeing their son as a daughter or vice versa.

From the day that the doctor announces the sex of the baby at birth, that is how the parents see their child. Many parents never notice "differences" or if they do they discount these as individualism or eccentricities. When an adult male child announces "Mum and Dad I want to become a female". Many parents can not cope and just can not comprehend how a person can be male on the outside but female on the inside. Plus, parents quickly worry about what people will think and how will they be judged as parents.

What do we call you now?

Often the first of many dilemmas is when the transgendered person wants to be called Alice instead of Mark, this is almost impossible for many parents. One reason being this is not the name the parents have called their child all of his life and secondly if the son doesn't look feminine it is just so much harder again. It is generally considered easier for parents if the name change is simi-

lar eg. Mark to Marcia. Sometimes parents and child can become estranged, just by the difficulty of the name change and this is sad.

Another problem similar to the name is the incorrect calling of "he/him" or "she/her" it is recommended to use the words "he" "him" when the person is dressed in male clothing and "she" "her" when dressed as a female. It can not only be embarrassing to everyone involved in the conversation but is seen as insulting by the individual when the wrong terminology is used. However, many parents feel if they do use correct terminology they feel they are condoning or encouraging "this stupidity". But, what parents need to understand is that by persisting to use wrong terminology will only make the person more angry and distant not deter them from having the sexual reassignment.

Parents fears and concerns

Another issue for parents of a transgender is they really question themselves about what they did wrong. Either while the baby was still in the womb or they question their parenting skills later. Parents also fear how society will perceive them as parents and are particularly sensitive to the possibility of ridicule and gossip. Another problem for parents is the feelings of isolation, shame, shock and confusion with what is happening, not feel strong enough to cope with the stress, while others can be homophobic.

Unfortunately, many parents can distance themselves from their child not necessarily because they aren't trying, but they just can't understand.

Being a parent of a lesbian or gay male is at least straightforward, it is just the sexuality and even though parents have problems understanding the sexual diversity they only have one issue to deal with. But for parents of a transgender they have two issues, a change of sex from male to female and then possibly being told they still prefer women . People can't comprehend why a person who claims to be heterosexual wants to become female but still have a sexual relationship with women. It seems like their son wants to become a lesbian or their daughter a gay male. People wonder why go through the pain of surgery and possibility of ridicule if born male and heterosexual but after the sexual reassignment still want to have what seems to be a same sex relationships. Many don't understand the person's sexual orientation hasn't changed just their gender, feminine/masculine.

Also by being transgender the appearance of the person changes from male to female which is announcing to the world that they are "different" and for some parents this is all too much to handle. Most parents are totally confused about changing gender. Because they can't envisage it for themselves they can't begin to understand how their child could possibly want to change. This can be a time when many transgender distance themselves from family members because they can not conform to family pressures and unfortunately this often leads to depression, low self esteem, loneliness and quilt.

Beginning the steps to surgery

Another fear for parents is the surgery. They don't understand the steps like seeing psychiatrists and other medical practitioners. Another contentious issue for many parents is the transgender son/daughter is often secretive about progress with doctors. Parents, feel they don't have the stages explained adequately and possibly the worst mistake many transgenders make is that as soon as they tell family members they want to immediately begin on hormone treatment and begin surgery.

This leaves parents in a state of panic and utter confusion. Compounding this problem is the "confidentiality rule" with doctors which prohibits parents talking to them about their child and what is involved. And not surprisingly, parents need time to come to terms with and understand what is happening and want their son/daughter to slow down before making a final decision.

But when we look at this from the transgendered person's perspective, they have known about their gender issues for a very long time. So often they wait for various reasons before telling and when they do they are more than ready for the necessary operations. Generally, they have already worked through the uncertainties and questions in their minds, sometimes quietly lived the life as the opposite gender and are comfortable with their decision by the time they inform family members. PFLAG urges patience from both the family members and the person having the sex reassignment operation. It can be very helpful to both parent and child if they attend a couple of the sessions with the psychiatrist together. This shows the transgender the parent/s are being supportive plus it helps the parents with their fears and assists with their understanding of what is involved, which again helps to make the transition easier for both parent and child. This is a time when parents can have much of the uncertainty eliminated.

Being a transgender is not easy

Being a transgender is not an easy option. It is not cheap and takes a great deal of inner strength to live the life. Initially, they need to go through a lengthy process of testing for schizophrenia; organic diseases, tumours plus the elimination of any mental or physical problems need to be ruled out. To achieve this, they have to answer and endure the most personal and sometimes irrelevant questioning from psychiatrists for at least one year. Plus, they need to see psychologists for testing to prove their sanity. Then they need to lead their life as a transgender for two years before the operation, to show that this is what they really want.

A transgender needs to be on hormones for the rest of their lives, have facial hair removed usually by laser treatment, learn to use cosmetics, shop for female clothes which can be intimidating, hope for family acceptance and finally to come out in society as the opposite sex. Plus, I am sure each person has individual problems which doesn't make their transition easy.

For many transgender, the process of beginning hormone treatment is like going through puberty again. The hormones cause temporary changes similar to young teens, some with flamboyant dress, others with the feeling of knowing it all and then eventually they quieten again and emerge at the other end having passed through their second puberty. This can be a difficult time for parents and son/daughter which all adds to the general confusion of what is happening and why.

Male to female transgender hormones help to develop breasts and increase body fat in particular areas. Whereas female to males take hormones so their voices deepen and their body hair and beard increase. However, when male to female transgender take hormones their voice doesn't alter. They need speech therapy.

Surgery these days is improving and fortunately so is the recovery time. After sexual reassignment the patient usually stays in hospital for two weeks. For some the operation is done by epidural, which means the patient is awake through the whole procedure. There is a period of discomfort for about a month after the surgery, the degree I am sure is individual and depends on a person's pain threshold. Post operative patients are required to stay in bed for about seven days after surgery. Some patients are able to return to work within three weeks of being out of hospital.

However, families and transgender need to be aware that it is important for the person to maintain the same hobbies, interests and friends after surgery because if these are not encouraged depression can develop and become a real problem. If a male to female transgender has always enjoyed fishing or bike riding then they should continue to enjoy these activities after the operation. They should not suddenly begin doing what is considered feminine activities just because they are now totally female on the inside and exterior. It needs to be remembered the person's brain and personality has not not changed by the sexual reassignment.

Some male to female transgender have breast implants to make them feel more feminine, some have facial reconstruction and the "adam's apple" shaved which helps to complete their transformation to being female. These surgeries are now able to be completed in a day surgery unit if the patient prefers.

Unfortunately, many put themselves at risk of HIV and sexually transmitted infections because many transgender enter into prostitution because they are forced out of mainstream employment and because of the great desire to have sex reassignment they will the earn the money anyway they can.

For many transgender they realize from a very early age that they are different, but most do not realize why they feel different and it can be a very confusing life. For those who feel comfortable with their inner and outer self matching we can not imagine how it must feel to be mismatched (that is the opposite inside to what we are seeing on the outside). It must be horrible. And, then when they finally can put a word to the difference they then have to slowly come to the decision and the huge realization of what is entailed to make them feel complete. Imagine how difficult it must be for a transgendered person. Every time he/she looks into a mirror they see the opposite image of what they want to be. It is a constant frustration and reminder that they are not complete in themselves.

Many in society believe that transgender are either mentally ill, odd, a reflection of bad parenting or from dysfunctional families but really this isn't so. We need to understand being a transgender like homosexuality is neither a choice or fad. Who would want to put themselves through a medical system that can become horrendous and not always sympathetic, live in a society that allows them few rights, plus the pain of surgery required to make them complete. Then there is the endless red tape of bureaucracy that generally makes their

lives difficult in whatever area it can. Plus there is the ostracism from family for many which can lead to depression and sometimes suicide.

Parents can make the transition easier

One important way that family can help is to provide them with information or tips on how to be more feminine or masculine. This may be how to "sit like a lady" or to not wear a man's watch, or help to apply cosmetics properly or help with hair, or just how to do the tie. There are a thousand small ways that we can help our children in their transition. We need to realise they are going to change anyway, we can not deter them, so we need to be as supportive as possible which will eliminate many problems for them further down their path.

These are just a few reasons why families need to be supportive of their family members who are transgender. Families should remember they are still the same people that we loved the day before they announced their desire to change their gender and they can only love you more by giving them the support they need, because these are not decisions they have made lightly.



Bisexuality

Bisexuality is a sexual orientation which means a person can be emotionally, physically and sexuality attracted to both male and female. It is an orientation that can initially create a lot of confusion not only with the bisexual person, but also with parents. Imagine being a young person going through puberty looking at both genders, it could be very confusing and possibly isolating.

We need to be aware bisexuality is just another sexual orientation like homosexuality and heterosexuality. Some bisexuals change partners constantly and others may only ever change sexually diverse partners once or twice in their life time. It is purely individual just like heterosexual or homosexual relationships, some last very long times and others don't. Most partners are faithful some are not

Bisexuality can be very confusing and confronting for parents

There is still discrimination and misunderstanding of bisexuality in the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender community and for many it can be isolating. The idea of bisexuality can make some people feel nervous because it is more comforting to be just straight or gay not a blend. You will hear unkind people say that bisexuals "swing both ways" or "they want the best of both worlds". They don't realise that being bisexual is not a choice just like being heterosexual is not a choice.

Parents may hear their bisexual children say that they refuse to label themselves stating that they just see themselves as people in loving relationships regardless of their partner's gender. A common saying is they are "people with personality not sexuality". However, this does not comfort parents trying to come to terms with news of their child's sexuality. We need to keep remembering that it is the person that is important not the sexual orientation.

Bisexuality is a sexual identity that can cause a lot of confusion and heartache for parents. Initially parents often think o.k. my child is at least half straight,

this is not so bad. But, then later can go through the confusion of wondering, "is this a partner or friend?" Parents then become very uncertain of their children and fear that they will lead unstable and possibly lonely lives.

The main concerns of parents

- Confusion and concern wondering about morals and family values bisexual children were taught while growing into adulthood. - As a parent we need to be reassured that this has nothing to do with how we have raised our child/children.
- The fears of sexually transmitted infections because of the perceived constant changing of partners. This is also just an unfounded fear. Bisexuals are no more likely to contract a sexually transmitted infection than anyone else. It is all about education and information.
- Will the child become lonely in old age? Again, there are no guarantees for our children. Our sexual orientation does not determine whether or not we will have a partner as we age.
- Will their child ever be faithful to one partner?- This is another issue that has no simple answer. How many heterosexuals have more than one marriage or monogamous relationship these days?
- Is this just a sign of immaturity or lack of will power? No, it is just that their sexuality is more fluid than others
- Are they just experimenting? Some may argue that if the person is very young they may be just questioning their sexuality. But mature adults in my opinion do not experiment unless they have an inclination towards that particular diversity.
- Is this relationship going to be long term? Perhaps.
- Another concern for parents is explaining to friends about changing partnerships. Many people can come to terms with same sex attraction but become very unsettled about the possibility of alternate sexual orientation that is straight/gay/straight relationships. Because they fear they will be judged harshly as incompetent parents for not teaching their child better

morals. Others are shamed when they believe their child's sex life could be a topic of gossip.

- Regardless of the sexual relationship i.e. heterosexual or homosexual, our children may be in at the time they always see themselves as a bisexual person, not heterosexual or homosexual.
- People look for different things in relationships between male and female partners. There is the emotional side of relationships, body shape and physique i.e. hard or soft bodies. Males often look for the physical side while females tend towards emotion.
- We need to encourage our children to be honest with prospective partners, because typically partners don't like the idea of loved one being unfaithful, so it's best to be honest and have open relationships with well defined rules.
- As parents we need to understand that the sexual orientation of bisexuality is not a mental illness in itself. But depression and suicidal tendencies are quite high amongst the bisexual community because of lack of understanding and discrimination.
- Research shows that females have more heterosexual relationships than males. Some believe this is because of lack of opportunity because society caters to the gay male with more support groups and social venues which give them more opportunity to meet prospective partners.
- Many people also have problems accepting bisexuality as a sexual orientation they see only homosexual or heterosexual. It is like they can only seeing black or white

Myths about the Bisexual Identity

- Others believe it is a choice and there is no need to be bisexual, why can't they just suppress the gay or lesbian side and just live a "normal" life. This is of course assuming it all comes down to choice.
- Some believe they just lack morals and are deviants.
- Many believe that bisexuality is more a female issue and again it all comes down to choice. People saying this forget about "pleasure".
- Another very common belief is that there are more females predominantly bisexual because of abuse that may have happened earlier in her life and because of this are confused. - Statistics show that one in four females are sexually abused before the age of eighteen, there are not that many bisexual females in society.

Parental Support and Understanding is needed

As parents of bisexual children, just like parents of lesbian, gay or transgender children we need to take time to come to terms with the news of their sexual orientation. Plus we need to strive to be as supportive as possible. Parents and family members need to realise that we can't change or encourage our children to just follow the heterosexual path.

We need to keep in mind that he/she is still the same child that we loved before discovering this new side to him/her. But we should also try to just be open minded when they bring friends home by not assuming everyone is a prospective partner.

It is also best to keep the communication channels open and encourage conversation about what is happening in their lives. Ask questions and be interested. As a heterosexual it is difficult to understand bisexuality and homosexuality. Generally we know very little about either orientation until one of our children "come out". But it is important that we strive to gain understanding and know that to be bisexual, like being homosexual is not a choice.



Conclusion

As parents, we need to remember to let our child/children know that we love them and are there for them. But, we also need to be honest with them. If we are having problems understanding their sexuality and decisions we should be honest and say that we don't understand. But, we need to let them know we are trying and we are supportive. We can achieve this by talking to them about the issues involved and asking questions in a positive manner. We need to keep communication channels open to let them know you are trying to understand. By doing this, we learn and we will ultimately succeed. It may not be easy and it may not always be smooth sailing, but it will be worthwhile because you will keep the positive relationship with your son/daughter.

This is where PFLAG can help. Initially, it can be difficult to take the first step but if parents make the effort they do find it helpful to be able to discuss their fears and concerns and who can understand better than another parent of a gay, lesbian or transgender.

Others can sympathise and provide tissues for tears, which is good but it is so beneficial to talk to other parents who really do understand and have had similar concerns, fears and issues. This is such a release and a relief for many parents. It helps to break the isolation by knowing you aren't alone. And importantly it can hasten understanding and acceptance of our children. Because, if we don't support them, who will?



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