

Dynamics of Parental Response to Disclosures **By Their GLBT Young Adult Child(ren)**

Hearing the words "Mom, Dad, I think I am gay" can be life changing for many parents. Those words sometimes challenge and dramatically reshape the preconceived image, dreams, and future expectations that a parent has for their young adult child.

Parental responses to a young adult child's gay disclosure can range along a continuum from complete rejection to extreme activism. Points on this continuum vary, grow and evolve as the nature of the relationship and deeper understandings emerge.

Common Parental Responses to Disclosure By Their LGBT Young Adult Child(ren)

- Why did my child have to tell me?
- Is it my fault?
- Who recruited my kid?
- What will other people think of me, having a GLBT son/daughter?
- What about the law?
- Should we tell the rest of our family? What about the neighbors? (Parents face the dilemma of balancing concerns about inadvertently "outing" their young adult child vs. the need for parents to get support for themselves.)
- How do I find "Objective" information?
- But the bible says this is a terrible sin!
- Isn't homosexuality an unnatural perversion?
- I have no problem with my child being gay. It doesn't matter to me!
- Are you sure you're really gay/lesbian/bisexual/transgender? Maybe this is just a phase – or you're confused.
- I'm desperate to talk to somebody! Who can I trust?
- What about AIDS/STD's?

Parental response of denial may take many forms: hostility ("No son of mine is going to be queer."), non-registering ("That's nice, dear, what do you want for dinner?"), non-caring ("If you choose that lifestyle, I don't want to hear about it."), rejection ("It's just a phase; you'll get over it."), or shaming ("If you hadn't been abused this wouldn't be happening to you.").

Parents may need some help in separating what is "normal" from what is a social/cultural/religious "norm."

In some instances sexual orientation can become the staging area for constant warfare between the parent(s) and their LGBT young adult child. It is possible that everything the LGBT young adult does and says may begin to be viewed as a symptom of their "problem:" extra-curricular priorities, use of language, choice of friends, selection of clothing, vocational pursuits, financial decision-making, etc. As long as this condition exists, both parent and youth risk becoming locked in a no-win impasse. Parents may need to be reminded that their LGBT young adult child is the same person today as s/he was yesterday before disclosure.

Many mothers and fathers - even the most liberal - are surprised at hidden prejudice(s) and/or bigotry that may emerge after they discover the true identity of their own LGBT young adult child. When a daughter or son discloses her/his sexual orientation or gender identity, distress and misinformation may surface – usually based on outdated information, cultural stereotypes, or one of several prevailing myths about homosexuality:

Myth 1: Homosexuality is linked with problems in a child's relationship with parents, such as a domineering or possessive mother and an ineffectual or hostile father.

Myth 2: Homosexuality involves a fear or hatred of people of the other sex, leading individuals to direct their sexual desires toward members of their own sex.

Myth 3: Homosexuality is just a passing phase, a period of sexual experimentation. (This is true for some people, but not for most people who “come out” as LGBT.)

Myth 4: Homosexuality is a choice. (There is no evidence to support suppositions that sexual orientation – heterosexual or homosexual – is a matter of choice; however, “coming out” as either straight or gay/lesbian/bisexual/transgender is a matter of choice.)

Myth 5: Homosexuality is caused when children were victimized, seduced, molested or sexually assaulted by an adult homosexual. There is no biological basis for homosexuality. (New research indicates that sexual orientation is at least partly biological, as the brain may differ with sexual orientation.)

Myth 6: Homosexuality is a mental disorder. (In 1973, the American Psychiatric Association removed the term homosexuality from the list of mental and emotional disorders stating sexual orientation is not a disorder.)

Myth 7: Homosexuality can be cured. (In 2009, the American Psychological Association officially endorsed a resolution that concluded “that there is insufficient evidence to support the use of psychological interventions to change sexual orientation.”)

Myth 8: Homosexual men are pedophiles. (The preponderance of convicted pedophiles are self-acknowledged heterosexual males.)

Myth 9: LGBT parents raise their children to be homosexual. (Just as most LGBT children grow up with heterosexual parents, most children of LGBT parents grow up to be heterosexual.)

Myth 10: Homosexuality is illegal. (Homosexuality has been decriminalized throughout the United States – although this is not the case in many other jurisdictions in the world. Whereas being homosexual is no longer illegal, it is true that the legal rights of LGBT individuals are not protected in many states and cities throughout the U.S.)

Parental alienation can reinforce self-hatred, isolation and suicidal ideation; indeed, parental rejection can be life threatening. Research by Caitlin Ryan, et.al. (2009) revealed that young gay people whose parents or guardians responded negatively when they disclosed their sexual orientation were more than eight times as likely to have attempted suicide, nearly six times as vulnerable to severe depression and more than three times at risk of drug use than those whose families accepted the news.

It is easy to overlook – or minimize – the psychological impact and stigma encountered by parents of an LGBT youth. Parents may often feel alone, as they assume no other friends, relatives or mothers and fathers of their youth's friends are living the experience of having an LGBT young adult. Parents who are accepting of the youth's sexual orientation or gender identity may experience ostracism from other family members, friends and neighbors, and their religious community.

Sometimes the “coming out” process can precipitate a temporary or extended reversal in parent-child roles. Usually, the LGBT young adult has been aware of his/her sexual orientation for some period of time before disclosure occurs. Therefore, s/he has had time to adjust to this [“alternative”] reality. However, for the parent(s), this disclosure may be jolting, sometimes precipitating an earthquake-like existential crisis. Parents may turn to their young adult child for guidance and understanding of sexual orientation issues; parents may have difficulty containing their emotions because of the impact on their life of this disclosure. Parents may lack access to supportive resources to help them gain insights about “the gay world” and they may seek help from their LGBT young adult to explore this new reality.

Some Questions For A Parent Of An LGBT Young Adult To Ask Him/herself

(Answering these questions honestly will reveal a lot about a parent’s degree of “true acceptance.”)

- Are you uncomfortable around your young adult's dating or life partner?
- Does your young adult's openness bother you?
- Do you find the thought of your young adult actually marrying his or her partner to be abhorrent?
- Are you having trouble with the idea of gay sex?
- Are you bothered by the words "homosexual," "gay," "lesbian," or "queer?"
- Are you unable to comprehend ‘What on earth is going on in my young adult's mind’?
- Do you spend time contemplating whether your LGBT young adult can be cured of homosexuality?
- Do you struggle with feeling that your young adult couldn't possibly be gay/lesbian/bisexual/transgender - “S/he doesn't fit the image!”?
- Do you worry that being LGBT means your young adult is going to be wildly flamboyant, offending everyone I know?
- Are you concerned that being LGBT means your young adult is going to live a lonely, miserable life?
- Do you assume that you'll never have any grandchildren because your young adult is LGBT?

Handout compiled by Jim Struve, LCSW (Salt Lake City, UT)

Some information in this handout was based on material from the following resources:

Bidstrup, Scott. (2006) *My Child is GAY! Now What Do I Do?* www.bidstrup.com/parents.htm

Goldman, Linda. (2008). *Coming out, Coming In: Nurturing the Well-Being and Inclusion of Gay Youth in Mainstream America.*

Ryan, C. (2009). *Helping Families Support Their Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBT) Children.* Washington, DC: National Center for Cultural Competence, Georgetown University Center for Child and Human Development.