

# Homosexuality



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Homophobia is like any other prejudice. It requires ignorance to fuel fear and hatred. As individuals, and as a society, we are all diminished whenever anyone degrades another.

Education is one of the few things which can conquer fear, so please pass this brochure along. It may help a friend; it may help someone you love; it may save a life. Of the many emotions a gay man or woman feel, perhaps the most powerfully pervasive is fear. The fear of being found out is real enough, but the worry does not end there. There also lurks the fear of being called names, being assaulted, perhaps even killed. For adults these fears are horrible enough. For a lesbian and gay teenager, who lack experience and life skills to cope with them, such fears can be overwhelming. Lesbian, gay, and bisexual youth face many problems as they realize they are homosexual. Often they don't know even one other homosexual person and feel very alone and misunderstood. They see very few role models, no one to identify with. No one knows their secrets, no one shares their pain. No one will stop others from name calling if the name calling is about homosexuality. Who would dare to speak up?

No one speaks up, not in junior high and high school. College, perhaps; pride events are more easily seen then, but in high school no one speaks up.

Imagine dearly loving someone else and having to keep it totally secret because if you don't you will be punished -- cast out of your home by your family, ostracized by your friends, perhaps losing your job. This is the world of the lesbian and gay young person.

The feelings homosexual youth face are only the beginning of the problem. As they recognize that they are different and discriminated against, they lose self esteem and become depressed. Many become suicidal and develop a

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feeling of extreme depression and helplessness. Those who don't commit suicide live an adolescence of silence and oppression, rarely being able to speak up without being struck down by peers. The U. S. Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) Task Force on Youth Suicide issued a report in January of 1989 concluding that lesbian and gay youth may constitute " up to thirty percent of completed suicides annually" and that " homosexuals of both sexes are two to six times more likely to attempt suicide than are heterosexuals. Homosexual youth can not speak up because of fear and misunderstanding. And when no one speaks up for them, no one stops the pain, many teens can not handle it and commit suicide. This is the meaning of the commonly known phrase, " Silence equals death."

Not only do they face unrestricted discrimination and harassment at school, they often face similar or worse homophobia at home. Parents, unaware of their children's sexual orientation, often make cutting remarks about homosexual television characters, community members, or the orientation in general. They may not even recognize their comments, but the child (or children) is hanging on to every word, looking for at least a tiny bit of acceptance from family. Many times they find hate instead of acceptance, sometimes to the point of being kicked out of the house at age 14 or 15 when a homophobic parent does find out. This leaves them with nowhere to turn.

Many of these teens are themselves suffering from the same prejudices that the rest of their family may share. Or perhaps they've gotten past that, and

started to forge a new identity, where being gay or lesbian is something of which they can be proud.

Sometimes, what makes it so especially hard for gay teens is the very thing that protects them, their invisibility. What African-American parent would be making jokes about black people at the kitchen table? What Jewish family would sit around casually commenting on how God condemns the Jews? But the lesbian, gay or bisexual teen, sitting there in their cloak of presumed heterosexuality, laughs outwardly, or joins in expressing shared disgust, while yet another chunk of their self-esteem has been chiseled away.

Homosexual teens can not confide in parents, friends, or often even the church. Most Christian churches condemn homosexuality and back up their beliefs with the Bible. However, the major references to homosexuality in the Bible are badly mistranslated. Nowhere does the Bible mention same-sex love negatively; it only mentions prostitution, specifically in reference to local cults.

More information can be found at the URL <http://cent1.lancs.ac.uk/lgb/eight.html> which is a detailed retranslation of eight major Bible passages used to condemn homosexuality. Homosexual youth often go to church with family as expected, only to hear the condemnation of themselves echoed by the entire church. Where is the loving God the church is supposed to be echoing? What love exists in condemning people for who they love? Each youth sits there listening to parents, siblings, friends, and religious leaders tear apart their feelings of love and self esteem, not speaking up out of fear for emotional and often physical safety.

The more discriminating the place, the more dangerous it is to speak up, but how much more dangerous is it to let a teen live in constant depression and fear? Obviously it is extremely dangerous, since as quoted earlier homosexual teens are up to six times more likely to commit suicide than heterosexual teens. Not only do homosexual youth hear discrimination and fear from home, church, and the community, they also are exposed to a subtler form of it at school. Though it isn't obvious, the extreme lack of proper information is a very big discriminating factor at most schools.

Parents and Boards of Education still fight to keep homosexuality-debate, discussion, even it's mere mention-out of schools. Nurses and librarians still fail to offer resources to timid young people with agonizing questions. In a 1993 study performed by the San Francisco Department of Public Health, ninety percent of youth (ages twelve to twenty five) with AIDS are gay or bisexual men, while those under age thirty comprise sixteen percent of AIDS cases. Given the lengthy incubation period, virtually all were infected as teenagers. Newt Gingrich has pledged to hold Congressional hearings on withdrawing federal funds from school districts that mention gays and lesbians in curricula services, a punitive and financially disastrous measure similar to the Robert Smith-Jesse Helms amendment that passed the Senate in August 1994 but then expired in the committee.

These amendments would effectively ax the very few school based programs that teach tolerance and foster self-acceptance. If homosexuality is mentioned at all, it is usually skimmed over and brushed off as something that "no one here actually needs to know about." It is assumed that the entire class is heterosexual and should not need to know what homosexuality and homophobia really are. However, according to popular

statistics about 10% of the population is homosexual. In a class of 20 students, that's 2 people. If the class size is 30, it's 3 or even 4 students. Up to 3 or 4 students must listen to how everyone else's sexual and emotional feelings are natural, but theirs are never mentioned. Rather than providing proper information on how homosexuals are often discriminated against, and what homophobia means and how it hurts, the class barely even mentions the subject if it does at all.

If a homosexual youth is lucky enough to find their way to the Internet, they are eventually greeted by a bit of a LBG-supportive environment. Several sites exist to help homosexual youth realize that they are normal, lovable, and can be successful. The sites also have many tips on coming out, especially to parents and family. However, many sites with very useful information for homosexuals are restricted to adults (age 18). Many of these sites do not contain sexually explicit material above what shows on prime time TV. The information directed at adults (announcements of pride events, etc.) is also of use to youth, and restricting the entire site to adults prevents youth from reaching useful pieces of information. The youth also need to know about adult same sex relationships; they have no or few role models available locally, and often the only way that they can learn that same sex relationships can last like marriage does is to read about it over the net. Keeping all information about adult same sex relationships away from youth prevents them from seeing the permanent, loving aspect of what their lives could be.

As homosexual youth enter college and begin to explore the world on their

own, many begin to find the support groups that were so lacking in high school. Large universities sometimes have official student organizations for homosexual students. Books are much more available, and often many people are publicly "out" on campus. This environment begins to help homosexuals understand themselves better. Some become very active and public, to help pave the way for people who may be having a harder time than they have. Many homosexual people gain the courage and independence to come out to their family, sometimes because it is the first time their physical safety is not in danger by doing so.

As homosexual youth mature and begin to develop adult relationships, they must integrate their feelings and attitudes into their normal life. They also usually overcome most of the homophobia that they grew up with. Often a part of the integration of growing up is that the person is able to stop focusing on their own homosexuality, becoming more open to same sex and opposite sex relationships without thinking about whether their homosexuality is showing or not. Homosexual people in this stage have begun to really be able to accept themselves without feeling obsessive or afraid of issues surrounding homosexuality. The details vary between people, but the overall change is toward self acceptance and comfortableness within society. This change is needed for proper social interactions, with friends and lovers. It most often happens in the late teens and early adulthood, because a lot of self inspection and independence occur then.

Homosexual teen suicide, discrimination from all areas of life, and misunderstanding of homosexuality, both from the heterosexual community

and from the homosexual youth who have not have access to information, would greatly reduce, or nearly disappear, if proper education was given in the public schools to combat homophobia. " Liberty is the right not to lie." Homosexual youth should not have to lie to hide their orientation from their parents, friends, and the rest of the community, just to stay alive.

Even one teacher taking a stand for proper homosexual information in schools can make a difference. That one teacher may be the role model one or several students needed to see to make them feel worthwhile and not suicidal. Too often though a teacher who stands up for equal rights and protection is cut down by the school administration and parents. However, even then a student may feel better that at least one person understands them and wants to fight for their rights. It can be the difference between total destitute and a bit of hope. Whether the teacher gives positive information in the classroom, or stops cutting remarks, or simply discreetly helps one or two students find a support hotline, it can often make the difference between life and death for despairing teens.

As more teachers, administrators, social workers, and other people speak up, the deadly silence and invisibility of homosexual youth begins to diminish. If silence equals death, then proper communication and information is the one way to insure life.



Words

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