

Lgbtq people and grieving the loss of partner

[Sociology](#), [Identity](#)



Sexual Identify

Sexual identity is an integral part of our lives. It shapes our identity as a person and relationships with others. Kids who identify as LGBTQ are very aware of and sensitive to social and familial pressures to engage only in heterosexual relationships. LGBTQ relationships are harder to understand and accept when they are not your experience. Because LGBTQ relationships are often seen as less valid than traditional relationships, the relationship is often viewed as unimportant, replaceable, or socially unacceptable. As a result relationships may be kept a secret or the families become estranged.

People who identify as LGBT face particular challenges when grieving the loss of a partner. Some couples experience rudeness and hostility as a result of homophobia. They have differing support needs from their heterosexual peers. They may face heterosexist interpretations about grief and loss born out of lack of understanding, fear or social shaming by others.

When families and friends ignore, demean or dismiss someone's sexual orientation or gender identity it can significantly contribute to disenfranchised grief - the grief that is experienced when a person incurs a loss that is not or cannot be openly acknowledged, publically mourned, or socially supported.

When LGBTQ couples are criticized and demeaned throughout the relationship, the grieving partner finds it much more difficult to grieve, heal and move into their new normal created by the death of their partner.

Disenfranchised Grief

Disenfranchised grief is defined as “ the grief that persons experience when they incur a loss that is not or cannot be openly acknowledged, publicly mourned, or socially supported.”

No one can understand totally the pain of another. We can meet at waysides of commonality and share our experiences and progress, and although there is healing in the act of sharing, we still feel alone in our sadness. What touches us in a positive way is when we feel understood. The loneliness of loss and alienation affects us deeply at the level of our souls. When grief is disenfranchised, poor bereavement outcomes are more likely, because of missing out on appropriate support. There are three ways that a grief may be disenfranchised:

- The relationship is not recognised
- The loss is not acknowledged
- The griever is excluded

Avoid Assumptions

It is important not to assume a person's sexual orientation or that everyone is comfortable talking about their sexuality or gender identity. If you are uncertain, never attempt to force disclosure. Instead, carefully explore the relationship and the grieving LGBTQ kid's identity, including the degree to which the relationship was disclosed and acknowledged in life. Allow the grieving LGBTQ kid to define what is right to discuss in their specific situation.

Capture Opportunities To Participate in The Dying Experience and Burial Rituals

When the relationship with the person who died was not acknowledged or publically recognized, the grieving LGBTQ kid is unable to openly acknowledge their feelings, publically mourn their loved one, or receive the social supports provided to their peers in heterosexual relationships. Instead, they may be expected to behave as if nothing happened which may excludes them from accessing valuable grief support services.

Encourage opportunities for the LGBTQ kid to participate in experiences and rituals surrounding the illness, death and burial of their loved one. Rituals and traditions provide a mechanism for demonstrating feelings of grief in a socially acceptable manner and environment. When grieving LGBTQ kids are denied this opportunity, they have no other option than to “ bury” their grief which leads to feelings of isolation and depression.

Create The Space To Say Goodbye and Grieve Openly

Some grieving LGBTQ kids are not able to openly grieve because sharing their grief with someone, taking bereavement days off from school or work, and other acts of mourning would reveal their own sexual identity. Instead they must grieve silently and in secrecy to avoid “ outing” themselves.

Encourage the grieving LGBTQ kid to visit their ill partner in the hospital or be present when their partner dies. If they are not able to be present at the death, offer the opportunity and arrange for them to spend time alone with the person after death to say goodbye.

Include the grieving LGBTQ kid in discussions and decision-making surrounding funeral/memorial planning and burial rituals. Offer them the opportunity to attend funeral or memorial services. Allow them to identify rituals which meaningfully validate and honor their relationship.

Allow grieving LGBTQ kids to take “ sick” days from school or work so they can openly grieve their loss. Arrange for a trusted adult to spend time with them to share memories and discuss feelings surrounding the loss of their loved one. Help the grieving LGBTQ kid identify coping mechanisms to deal with the many changes the impact of the death has on their life. Help them build a vocabulary to use when speaking of their loss to others who may not understand or be as accepting of the depth of their grief.

Include the grieving LGBTQ kid in discussions involving post-death affairs. Arrange for the grieving LGBTQ kid to select a few meaningful possessions from their deceased partner.

Provide LGBTQ-Informed Grief Resource

LGBTQ-informed resources are often difficult to find. The inability for a grieving LGBTQ kid to access these resources can result in increased seclusion, isolation and increase the risk for prolonged bereavement.

Grieving LGBTQ kids in relationships which have not been openly disclosed may be overlooked by healthcare professionals who fail to recognize that they have lost their primary relationship.

Joining a traditional grief support group may not be seen as a viable option by grieving LGBTQ kids. They may not see it as helpful because they fear a

lack of acceptance from other members. Some who do attend are treated with hostility and/or a lack of understanding. In some cases the discrimination is more indirect, with conversation focused on the “ normal” heterosexual relationship with no consideration of other types of relationships. It can be particularly difficult for grieving LGBTQ kids, as they fear they will not be accepted or taken seriously by professionals or loved ones.

Thoroughly evaluate the grief programs and services available to LGBTQ kids in your community. Specifically ask how LGBTQ kids are supported in the environment - are there other LGBTQ kids in the group? What opportunities will the kids have to honor their relationships during the course of grief work? Can they openly discuss and receive support concerning the special needs and challenges they face as LGBTQ kids whose relationship may or may not have been openly acknowledged? If it is a “ traditional” grief group, what activities are incorporated in the group to promote inclusion and acceptance of children with different (diverse/atypical) sexual or gender identities?.

LGBTQ-informed grief resources provide grieving LGBTQ kids with the shared understanding and compatibility that comes from being around others who live similar experiences. In this setting they know that their feelings are understood, that they are accepted, and that no one will judge or ridicule them.

Acknowledge The HIV/AIDS Stigma

The stigma attached to HIV/AIDS becomes a major barrier to the comfort level, trust, and safety of LGBTQ kids who attempt to participate in support

programs. HIV or AIDS remains a 'shadow' over the bereavement experiences of males who identify as gay or bisexual. Losing a partner to HIV or AIDS is often related to social isolation and high levels of depression.

When the death is from a cause that members of the LGBTQ community are more likely to be exposed to, such as HIV/AIDS, the grieving LGBTQ kid might feel guilty about their own survival and good health. They may also have increased fear and anxiety about whether the same thing will happen to them as the person they lost.

In cases where it was assumed AIDS was the cause of death, but it was not, the grieving LGBTQ kid may be required to explain the death in more detail than they would have preferred to at that time. Help them to develop vocabulary and responses for questions which might arise surrounding the cause of death. Also provide a few sentences which allow the grieving LGBTQ kid to end the conversation when they feel uncomfortable.

Strengthen Family Relationships and Support For Grieving LGBTQ Kids

When family, peers, or the community fail to support grieving LGBTQ kids because of sexual or gender identity differences, it contributes to a sense of social invisibility for the grieving LGBTQ kid and complicates the grieving process. If immediate family is not approving of the LGBTQ relationship, they are angry about the relationship and have trouble being supportive.

Family members don't have to understand everything. They need only to love and accept their LGBTQ kid. Their love and acceptance provides a

support platform critically important to the kid's ability to process the finality of death and grieve the impact of that loss on their life.

Some LGBTQ kids fear sharing too much with their family, with whom they were 'out', at the risk of pushing them away. Clearly communicate with the grieving LGBTQ kid about what you are comfortable discussing. If you are unable to objectively discuss aspects of the relationship, identify a therapist or other trusted adult who is willing to engage in dialogue with the grieving LGBTQ kid.

The grieving LGBTQ kid's relationships with their partner's biological family may abruptly end after the death. When this happens, it not only changes established routines and relationships but creates a secondary loss for the grieving LGBTQ kid to deal with, particularly if they had been close for many years. Encourage the grieving LGBTQ kid to identify their feelings and assist them in creating strategies they can use to deal with the loss of this continuing bond to their partner. If appropriate, support the grieving LGBTQ kid in communicating with the partner's family to explore the possibilities of ongoing contact.