

Understanding My Gay, Lesbian or Bisexual Parent

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Reacting to the news

Since twenty percent of gay, lesbian and bisexual (GLB) people marry into heterosexual relationships, learning that your parent is attracted to members of their own sex is a unique but common experience. If you had been raised with this knowledge, among family members who respect and support diversity, accepting your parent is not only obvious, it's natural. However, we live in a society that assumes everyone is born heterosexual, yet some are not ready (or able) to challenge this assumption during adolescence. As such, children can learn at any age that their parent is gay, lesbian or bisexual.

When you first hear the news, it may or may not make sense. You may have suspected the truth, or you may be completely surprised. You may need between a few minutes to several days to absorb the information and then, the questions will begin flooding your mind...

- 1) Why are you telling me this?
- 2) Are you sure?
- 3) How is Mom or Dad [other parent/partner] handling the news?

- 4) Are you involved with someone?
- 5) How long have you known?
- 6) How come you didn't say anything sooner?
- 7) Who else knows?
- 8) What else should I know?
- 9) What about AIDS? Are you ill?
- 10) What are people going to think?

Our parents are our first and most important teachers. Whether they are providing us with the necessities of life, or explaining its mysteries, we depend on them for our sense of security and sense of self. As we mature, others may love, protect and influence us, but the bond we share with our parents, supports a relationship quite unlike any other. Any situation that makes us question that bond can bring an array of feelings and emotions.

Things you may be feeling:

- 1) Shock, confusion, anger, sadness
- 2) Relief, especially if you have suspected
- 3) Embarrassment, discomfort
- 4) Fear
- 5) Loss (of your childhood, home, family, stability, personal security and/or identity)
- 6) Self doubt
- 7) Isolation (make sure you have someone who will listen to your concerns)

Coming-out can hasten a period of rapid change for the entire family. It is normal to feel confused and worried about the future. You may find your emotions sway with each new conversation on the matter. Try to be calm and patient. This is truly a situation that will improve with time.

Factors that may influence how you feel about having a GLB parent:

- 1) Your existing relationship with your parents
- 2) Your understanding of sexual orientation
- 3) Your parents' marital/partnership status
- 4) Your dependency on your parents
- 5) Your age
- 6) Your religious beliefs
- 7) How well other family members adjust
- 8) Attitudes of your friends and/or life partner

When change is abrupt and unfamiliar, we may resist parting with ideas or beliefs that have served us well. Initially, you may struggle with the idea that your mother or father is attracted to members of their own sex; it may be difficult to picture them in a same-sex relationship; the idea may seem too far-fetched! Some people feel their parent has deceived them; they may even question their own identity, as they recognize their parent's influence at work, *"I'm a lot*

like my dad; if he is gay, maybe I am too!” Some wonder if their GLB parent regrets having children - perhaps parenting responsibilities have kept them in a heterosexual relationship that wasn't meant to be. GLB parents regret the pain their loved ones feel, but they don't regret bringing their children into the world and many continue to feel a deep love for their straight spouses or partners.

You can expect to go through an adjustment period. Take time to absorb the news and educate yourself about sexual orientation. Open your heart to the person you call mom or dad and try to understand the journey that has brought them to this point in their life. Find someone who listen and support you in your growth, and do your best to assist other family members, but know your limits! When the pain of another is making it difficult for you to move forward, step back and connect them with someone who can listen objectively.

Most people accept their GLB parents and many report having a closer, more meaningful relationship. The parent who felt enormous pressure to keep their sexual orientation hidden may become more open and comfortable sharing their thoughts and feelings on other subjects. Acceptance is the key!

What does it mean to be gay, lesbian or bisexual (GLB)?

Gay, lesbian and bisexual parents are like any other mothers and fathers; their ability to love, nurture and provide a healthy home for their children is not compromised because of their sexual orientation. GLB people are not weaker or any less capable than anyone else. Homosexuality is not an illness, a defect, or a perversion; it is a normal and expected reality for 5 – 10% of the population. While their basic parenting concerns are the same, GLB parents may also worry about how society will treat their children. GLB people are not the only victims of homophobia.

Gay men and women

“Gay” is a term that describes the same-sex attraction felt by both men and women, however some women prefer the term lesbian. The word “gay” first crossed the gender/sex threshold in England during the 16th century, when it was applied to male actors who were cast into female character roles. During the 19th century, Europeans associated the term with heterosexual promiscuity, however it did not cross into sexually diverse communities until much later. Under this meaning, “gay” projected an impression of perversity. In the early 20th century, American men and women experiencing same-sex attractions became the first to identify as “gay”, preferring it to the word “homosexual”, a term used primarily by mental health professionals.

Lesbian women

Not all lesbian women identify with the word “gay”. Some feel it does not reflect the unique nature of a romantic connection between two women; others prefer it for its historical and cultural significance. The word “lesbianism” first appeared in 1890, followed by the adjective “lesbian” in 1890, and as a noun in 1925 (*Oxford English Dictionary*). Prior to this, the word “Sapphic” referred to homosexual relations between women. These words share a common source. Lesbos is an island in the North Aegean Sea; its inhabitants are called Lesbians. Sappho was a famous Greek lyric poet who lived on Lesbos c. 600 B.C. Her writings were entrenched with erotic sensuality directed towards both men and women. Nineteenth century

doctors borrowed the historical reference to identify women who form romantic relationships with other women.

Bisexual, pansexual and queer

Bisexual men and women do not require their sexual partner to be a specific gender. They can become involved with a man just as easily as a woman. That doesn't mean that they need relationships with both in order to feel fulfilled. Some believe that bisexual people are just confused. Bisexuality is a naturally occurring orientation and people who are truly bisexual are no more confused than anyone else. People who are questioning their orientation will sometimes identify as bisexual, but this is temporary and driven by their need to find a label that "fits". Bisexual people can feel misunderstood. When they are involved with a partner of the opposite-sex, they are considered straight; when they are partnered with a member of the same-sex, they are considered gay or lesbian. Bisexual people are neither gay/lesbian nor straight; these labels do not reflect who they truly are.

The terms "pansexual" and "queer" are similar to bisexual, but they may also include individuals (or their partners) who feel they do not fit the traditional definitions of male or female (transsexual, intersexual, etc). "Queer" is a term that may be considered derogatory and should be used only with those who claim it as their sexual orientation.

What are homophobia and heterosexism?

We live in a heterosexist society. This means that our collective thoughts and behaviours are sponsored by the inherent assumption that everyone is or should be heterosexual. Some people will feel uncomfortable observing anything that contradicts this assumption. This discomfort is called homophobia. It's homophobia that drives local bar owners to complain if they see two women locked in a romantic kiss, or passersby to cringe when they notice two men holding hands. While we often celebrate the differences that make us all unique, society tends to judge sexual minorities. Perhaps this is because we lack a common understanding of sexual orientation; perhaps we fail to see that it has variations, just like any other human trait. At one time it was not acceptable to be left-handed; social equality will happen for GLB individuals, it's just a matter of time.

Canada has taken a progressive approach to equal rights for GLB persons and mainstream attitudes are improving. Today, they share in almost every legal right afforded to people who are straight. Furthermore, they will meet many people who welcome their contributions because they are different, not in spite of it.

How can they be sure?

Our feelings give us our strongest clues as to who we are. We know what stirs us emotionally, even if we can't quite put a label on it. Do you remember your first crush as a teenager? Perhaps it was on a classmate or maybe even a teacher. Whenever that person walked by, you may have felt a strange warmth in your stomach, perhaps you found yourself at a loss for words.

Like most people, those who are GLB can experience their first same-sex attraction before puberty. They may not understand their feelings; they just know they feel drawn to a particular

person. With age and the onset of puberty, their feelings may become clearer, however many learn to bury their natural attractions because they understand society's views on homosexuality. People can tune out their inner compass – for a period of time, but inevitably these feelings resurface in the form of health issues. Our feelings have a way of making sure they are heard, even when we don't want to listen.

Believe what your GLB parent tells you about their sexual orientation. They understand the risk associated with coming-out; they know it means their life will change. You can be sure they've thought it through quite deliberately.

Coming to terms with the news

Accepting the idea that our mother or father is GLB means we must let go of certain assumptions about who they are. This may involve replaying our childhood memories with the understanding that our parent has always been gay, lesbian or bisexual. It's our way of setting aside the rules that once defined our past, but are no longer working in our present, or helping to predict the future. Typically, we fine-tune these "rules" as we mature and gain a better understanding of the world, but when faced with information that contradicts a basic assumption, we must re-process the beliefs we've attached to that assumption in order to feel secure in what we know. Many people experience this as a grieving process and of course, everyone grieves in their own way, and in their own time.

What has life been like for him or her?

The process of self-discovery is unique for everyone. People can go through a lengthy "questioning" or "curious" phase before fully understanding their sexual orientation. They may be ready to accept who they are, but not ready to deal with the potentially negative fallout. Living with such a secret can cause severe anxiety, leading to depression.

Some GLB children recognize they're different as early as age three, but do not connect it to sexual orientation until later in life. When they become aware of their same-sex attractions, some fear the loss of friends, family and certain life goals. Marriage and career expectations may seem out of reach for an adolescent who's unaware of their opportunities as a GLB adult. Some try to set aside their orientation, believing they can bury their feelings; others may not consider these attractions meaningful until later in life.

Internalized homophobia has undoubtedly had an impact on your mother or father. Not everyone accepts or respects people who are GLB and your parent has likely faced a good deal of fear in accepting who they are. Society does not automatically acknowledge diverse sexual and gender identities and by puberty, most people have sent and received millions of messages reinforcing the idea that everyone is straight (heterosexism). Your parent has had to overcome this assumption in order to accept who they are.

Everyone copes with fear and negative emotions in their own way, but you may recall times when your parents' attitudes or behaviours seemed unhealthy or unbalanced. Perhaps they experienced a period of being overly negative or withdrawn; maybe they filled their life with a variety of distractions or became over focused on one thing. Many GLB live with their secret until they can do so no longer. Your mother or father certainly thought about telling you and/or

your other parent for a very long time. It was not an easy choice, but likely it was the only one they could make.

Being gay, lesbian or bisexual is completely normal!

All living things (human beings, animals, plants, fish, etc.) appear in nature with a wide range of naturally occurring variations. Human beings vary in skin colour, hair colour, height, left or right-handedness, weight, intelligence, etc. Just as society would normally expect that some people have red hair, are left-handed, or have blue eyes, it is also normal to expect that some people in any population will naturally be gay, lesbian or bisexual.

Being GLB is not a state of mind (you cannot choose who you are attracted to); it is a state of being (a real part of every person's make-up). Acting gay or engaging in homosexual behaviour cannot make a person gay. *Acting* is something we choose to do and we frequently change our choices to suit our immediate needs. A state of being is self-evident; it is part of us whether we accept it or not, and though we may temporarily ignore it, we can never escape it.

Our sexual identity is a gift. We do not simply wake-up one day newly born into our sexual identity; we grow-up over many years observing the world through the lens of our unique individuality. Intuition, creativity, intellect and compassion all evolve on the foundation of who we are, not who others wish us to be. No one quality can be distinguished separately from the whole of who we are and the diversity of all forms of human expression ensures that no two people are exactly alike.

How did this happen?

No one knows for certain why some people are straight and others are not. Scientists have conducted considerable research trying to answer this question. Current evidence would suggest that sexual orientation is determined in the womb. It may be genetic, but it may also be random chance. Until there is a clear scientific explanation, many people will continue to believe that it is a combination of both genetic and early childhood influences. We already know that many of our other natural tendencies, (special talents or abilities), develop this way.

What might they be thinking?

Your parent is wondering the same thing about you! They're worried you may not accept them. Even if you say you do, they will wonder to what degree. They're probably fairly sure they can no longer keep their sexual orientation a secret, but sharing the news may come at a cost. They don't want to lose you; your opinion counts. If they say that it doesn't, chances are they're shielding themselves from the pain of rejection.

If your parent is single you may be wondering, "There's no reason for me to know, why did they have to tell me?" People come-out for different reasons: they may need emotional support; perhaps they can no longer cope with pretending to be straight; maybe they are in danger of physical harm. Most likely, they just want to be honest. It may have taken them a long time to understand their sexual orientation. Telling you is an outward acknowledgement of their inward reality. Talking about it makes their situation valid and less frightening – a real part of who they are.

Coming-out is also an important part of self-acceptance. Everyone needs to share the relevant details of their life with those who are important to them; it is the same for people who are gay, lesbian or bisexual.

What is my straight parent experiencing?

Everyone processes life changing news in his or her own way and yet, many straight spouses experience a common healing process. Here is a brief overview of the thoughts, concerns and emotions many straight spouses work through in coming to terms with their partner's sexual orientation.

Five stages of acceptance for straight spouses

1) Shock & denial, and/or validation of suspicion

How your mother or father reacts will depend on the following:

- i) Their basic personality (emotional well-being, ability to cope)
- ii) The type of relationship they have shared with your GLB parent (healthy & supportive vs. dysfunctional & abusive)
- iii) How they perceive their spouse as an individual (reliable & honest vs. self-centered & manipulative)
- iv) How they perceive their identity in relation to the marriage/partnership
- v) How they feel the news will change their life

Your straight parent may feel angry or sad; or they may seem completely calm, not really knowing what to say or do. Some may have suspected and will feel a sense of relief now that the news is out in the open.

2) Reacting to the news

Many straight spouses react with anger and self-doubt. He or she may question whether certain parts of the relationship were fake, or if they could have done something to avoid this outcome. Your straight parent may need to look at the situation from many different angles before fully comprehending the situation.

3) Making decisions

Once your straight parent accepts that things have permanently changed, he or she may be able to proceed with making decisions about the future. "Making decisions" does not mean they are no longer hurt or angry; it means they are ready to factor the news into decisions about their future.

4) New understanding and healing

At some point your straight parent will let go of the assumptions they've long held about their partner and realize that each is living a separate reality. This awareness may permit your straight parent to cast new light on the past and present, perhaps allowing them to reclaim part of their self-confidence. If they have been blaming themselves, they may be ready to process some of this pain.

5) Moving forward with life

The day will come when your straight parent is ready to chart a new path for themselves, or in a more clearly defined relationship with your GLB parent. Some straight spouses adapt in a relatively short period of time; others may require years. Maintaining a positive outlook will be easier with the love and support of those who care and those who have shared a similar experience. The [Straight Spouses Network \(click\)](#) has created an online community for those whose partner is gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender.

Adapted from the Straight Spouses Network

What should I tell my dependant children about their grandparent?

Telling your young children their grandparent has a same-sex partner will not hurt, stigmatize or damage them provided: you **tell them what they need to know as children**, not as adults. In fact, there are many positive reasons for sharing the news with your children:

- 1) They will have a better understanding of how the partner is connected to their grandparent, thus providing them with a context for this person's place in the family
- 2) Your child may pick up cues from the communication exchanged between your parent and their partner; telling them will alleviate any confusion or guesswork on the part of your child
- 3) It establishes an open and honest dialogue between you and your children on matters pertaining to sexual diversity
- 4) It lets them know that it's okay to be different
- 5) It qualifies the meaning of family unity, love and acceptance for your children, your parent and their partner

Young children understand that life partners share a bond that is different from other relationships. They don't see you and your partner in the same context they see you and your friends or co-workers. Explaining same-sex relationships to your young children is no more complicated than telling them that married couples do not always include one man and one woman. In the case of your parent, it will be easier if you can relate the information to their same-sex partner.

"You know that Mommy and Daddy love each other very much. Well Nanny and Martha love each other in the same way...Yes, sometimes two women (or two men) fall in love and become part of each other's family. Martha and Nanny have decided to be a family together so, that makes Martha part of our family too."

If your children are school age, you may wish to use the word gay, lesbian or bi.

"Nanny is a lesbian woman, so is her partner, Martha."

As children grow, their perceptions of GLB people are influenced by their peer attitudes. They may have a lot of misconceptions about what it means to be GLB and they will look to you for the proper information...if you remain open to their questions.

Up to age 11, children are fairly open-minded and accepting of GLB family members. After age 11, puberty, insecurity with their own sexuality and peer/social influences may cause them to question the value of a same-sex relationship however, if you accept your GLB parent, typically so will they.

Things to Remember When Telling Your Children:

- 1) Make sure you are comfortable with your parent's sexual orientation before discussing it with your children. It's okay to not have all the answers, but it's not okay to share the news if you feel embarrassed or ashamed. Your non-verbal cues speak volumes about how you really feel.
- 2) Keep the language and information age appropriate. If you're unsure of what that means, first talk about your relationship with your partner (or another couple they know). Use their understanding as your guide for speaking about your parent.
- 3) Don't use your own knowledge to assume what they're asking. Have them explain their questions if you're not sure what they mean. Children may not have the vocabulary or life experience to ask clear, concise questions, but they will find a way of communicating what they want to know.
- 4) Be aware that teenagers (usually boys) may worry that homosexuality runs in the family. A gay grandfather could mean they might be gay too. Reassure them that they are their own person; their sexual identity has nothing to do with anyone else's.
- 5) Talking to your children about sexual diversity will foster healthy dialogue in other areas of your relationship. If they become aware that you have chosen not to mention a GLB family member, they may think you are ashamed of him or her. If your child questions his or her own sexual orientation, this knowledge will weigh heavily on them.
- 6) Regardless of your child's sexual orientation, they will know, befriend and work with people who are gay, lesbian, bisexual and/or transgender. Your example will teach them to welcome diversity into their lives, improving their chance of becoming self-confident and open-minded adults. We tend to sentence ourselves with the judgments we reserve for others.

Things you may hear

Knowing and understanding the language of sexual diversity can lend clarity to the information you read and hear. As you become more comfortable with this new vocabulary, you will undoubtedly absorb words that pertain to gender-identity. This knowledge will help you to understand and embrace the vast community of people touched by sexual and gender diversity. Try to be open-minded, many people in our world are seeking acceptance.

Common words associated with sexual orientation

Asexual, bisexual, gay, homosexual, lesbian, pansexual, queer, questioning, straight

Myths & Stereotypes

Whenever humanity has set aside discussion on important issues, mythology can take the shape of truth. Sexual orientation defines several important aspects of the human condition and people tend to fear what they cannot understand, especially when it concerns other people. Unfortunately, this means the most damaging misconceptions can become the most widely believed and the hardest to eliminate. Today, more people are engaging in healthy discussion on sexual diversity. Many of the old myths are losing credibility, but here are a few that remain:

1) Other than my mother or father, I don't know any gay, lesbian or bisexual people.

You may not know of any who are "out", but you most certainly know someone who is "closeted" (hiding their sexual orientation from others).

2) You can tell who is gay, lesbian or bisexual by the way they act.

Sometimes you can, and other times you can't. Usually, you can only "spot" them if they want to be identified. Gay, lesbian, bisexual and straight people can demonstrate any mix of masculine, feminine or androgynous mannerisms. "Gender expression" is a separate component of sexual identity. It does not influence one's attraction to others.

3) Gay men want to become women, and lesbians want to become men.

Some people are born with male bodies but consider themselves female, others are born with female bodies but consider themselves male. These are issues of gender identity and possibly intersexuality, but not homosexuality. Most gay, lesbian and bisexual people are happy with their bodies; they do not wish to use hormones or have surgery to modify their appearance.

4) In a same-sex relationship, one person assumes the male role and the other one plays the female.

Sexual orientation has nothing to do with a person's gender-role. Gay, lesbian and bisexual people partner for the same reasons as heterosexual couples: love, sexual attraction, companionship and common goals or ideals. Two masculine (or feminine) men can make excellent life-partners, so can two feminine (or masculine) women. Gender-role can be an issue for someone who is struggling with his or her gender-identity, but trans people are also gay, lesbian, bisexual or straight.

5) Lesbian couples want to copy the gender roles of a heterosexual marriage ("butch" and "femme" couples)!

Many women prefer not to be restricted by the rigid gender roles associated with being "butch" (masculine) or femme (feminine), but for others it is an important part of their identity.

6) Lesbians are just man-haters who've had a few bad experiences with men!

Many lesbian women report their lesbianism as a result of strong, emotional, and/or romantic feelings towards other women from an early age, not as a direct result of negative experiences with men.

7) Gays and lesbians have poor social relationships!

Studies have shown that sexual orientation has nothing to do with the quality of one's social relationships. Gay, lesbian and bisexual people tend to rely more on friends and support contacts because family members cannot always understand what it's like to not be straight.

8) Most lesbians have "penis envy"!

Although there are some lesbian women who have achieved a more masculine status than other women, it does not mean they wish to have a penis. Lesbians are generally happy with their bodies and do not wish to have them altered through hormones and/or surgery.

9) Being gay, lesbian, or bisexual is wrong!

The medical community dismissed the idea that homosexuality was a mental disorder in 1973. Both the Canadian Psychological Association (CPA) and the American Psychological Association (APA) consider same-sex attractions to be perfectly normal. Canada is now the 4th country to legalize same-sex marriage along with Belgium, The Netherlands, and Spain. Homosexuality is not the problem; the problem is thinking we should all be straight!

10) It is against God's will to become sexually involved with members of your own sex!

There are many opinions about homosexuality among the various world faiths however; most would agree that intolerance and hatred are wrong. Many religions welcome gay, lesbian, bisexual, trans-identified, and intersexual members into their communities of faith.

11) Homosexuality is the result of either early problems in the brain, or certain parenting styles immediately following birth.

Nobody knows (with absolute certainty) why some people are gay, lesbian or bisexual and others are not. Most researchers believe that it cannot be pinned to one single factor; it is likely the result of a combination of social, psychological and biological influences. Recent literature points to genetics; research has shown that our sexual orientation is "pre-wired" before birth. Most in the scientific community regard homosexuality as a natural variation of the human condition, not a choice of lifestyle.

12) Lesbians can't take jokes about their sexual orientation.

Who enjoys hearing jokes about their sexual orientation? People who have not been exposed to jokes and insensitive remarks might not realize the powerful impact such comments can have on a person who is questioning their sexual orientation. Furthermore, repeated exposure (to such remarks) will erode that person's self-esteem.

13) Why do gays and lesbians have to flaunt their sexuality?

This begs the question, "What is flaunting?" Straight people often place a photo of their partner in their workspace, they comfortably kiss hello or goodbye, they hold hands when they go for a walk and they wear matching rings to symbolize their union. Is this flaunting?

In Western society, whether you're straight, gay, lesbian, bisexual or trans, everyone has the right to respectfully demonstrate affection in public. No one is exempt from this right and no one is less deserving because of his or her minority status.

Unfortunately, sexual minorities often find it difficult to comfortably express affection. For instance, a woman drops her purse at the grocery store. Her same-sex partner picks it up; she smiles and says, "Thank-you". What if she says, "Thank-you Dear" instead? She knows that several may turn and give them an uncomfortable stare. Some may even

engage in whispered heckling, or harass them on the way to their car. Is she flaunting her sexuality?

Social scientists use the term “heterosexual privilege” to describe the behaviours that cannot be comfortably duplicated in public by same-sex couples.

14) Some people believe GLBT persons flaunt their sexuality during Gay Pride events. There are many reasons why people participate in Pride. Here are just a few:

- It is an opportunity for them (and their families) to safely participate in community events. Many live in secrecy to protect their safety, job, living arrangements and dignity
- They wish to commemorate times when they or other GLBT persons have faced persecution
- It is an opportunity to feel normal and accepted within their community
- Many straight family members participate to show support for their GLBT loved ones

15) Employment equity gives jobs to unqualified people; why do homosexuals feel the need to demand special rights!

Basic human rights are not special rights. The aim of employment equity is to end discrimination, not grant special privileges. Legally, on-the-job performance cannot be measured using one’s gender, race, culture, religion or sexual orientation. Taking steps to ensure that you are assessed fairly is not a special right; it is a human right.

16) Why do gays and lesbians want to bring their issues into the school system? I don't want my kids exposed to this, even as an extension of the sex-ed program.

Very few parents know the facts on sexual orientation or gender identity. Those who talk to their children about sex usually do not include these topics in their discussions.

In Canada, most students will receive some education on sexual diversity, but most of their ideas will come from a mix of pop-culture, family and peer influences. They are exposed to a limited amount of factual information. Homophobic and transphobic bullying remain a problem in Canadian schools and gay, lesbian, bisexual and trans youth run a high-risk of depression, substance abuse and suicide. It is a tough way to enter one’s adult years. Furthermore, almost everyone knows or meets someone who is gay, lesbian, bisexual, trans-identified or intersexual in his or her lifetime. It is easier to form healthy relationships when prejudice is not a factor.

17) Bisexual people don’t know what they want. They will partner with anyone who is willing to have sex with them.

A person’s sexual orientation has nothing to do with their ability to remain monogamous, or how frequently they wish to have sex. Bisexual people are not confused and their orientation does not compel them to partner with both genders at once. They can genuinely fall in love with either a man or a woman; their partner’s gender does not matter to them. They often face discrimination from those (gay, lesbian and straight) who do not understand bisexuality. Many believe that sexual orientation and gender identity exist as opposites (lesbian/straight, male/female); it simply isn’t true. Sexual orientation, as with all

human traits, exists on a continuum, the same as varying degrees of brown hair, intelligence, height, weight, creativity, etc.

Words That Hurt

Words that disparage gay, lesbian or bisexual people will now hold greater meaning for you. You may detect nuances in comments or jokes that once flew past your radar. It will become apparent that GLB persons are not the only victims of homophobia; parents, family members and friends also feel the sting and embarrassment of homophobic prejudice.

You cannot control what others say however, understanding where the words come from may reduce the impact. People (of all ages) who are sexually immature, or who have a limited understanding of human sexuality, may believe that people who are GLB are not normal. You will meet people who are uncomfortable or intimidated by sexual realities they cannot comprehend. Those who are polite will simply keep their ideas private, while others, (the particularly rude ones), may use insults to reduce gay, lesbian and bisexual people to a status that makes sense to them. It is wrong, small minded and unfair, but it happens. Early philosophers first posed the idea that the earth was round in the 4th century. Columbus set sail some 1200 years later with most people still believing the earth was flat. Progress may seem slow, but fortunately we're well beyond 1492.

The following are common examples of words that hurt:

Bitch, cow, cupcake, dyke*, faggot, fairy, fruit, pansy, sissy, queer* (Some people legitimately identify as queer or dyke but others still consider it offensive.)

What can they expect from life?

People who surround themselves with those who care and accept who they are, have a better chance of living a happy and healthy life. Some GLB people use the term "chosen family" to refer to friends who take on support roles normally held by family members. These individuals feel disconnected from their biological family. Anyone who faces prejudice or discrimination is more vulnerable unless they have a strong support network in place. This is one of the reasons why GLB communities tend to support their own.

Your mother or father has every right to expect the life of their choosing. Keep in mind, everyone is different; we all have separate expectations based on our personality. Some goals may be more difficult to achieve than others. If they receive strong support from people who love them, they will have an excellent chance of accomplishing anything they wish. Nothing is impossible.

Support

Support is important for everyone; we all need someone to listen to our concerns. It is not the same as acquiring new information. "Information" feeds our minds and intellectually sustains us and while it can provide us with certain tools for coping, we are still alone in our quest. "Support" connects us to other people, which is an inherent human need.

You may find yourself unable to talk to others about your GLB parent. Living as a “closeted child” is an isolating experience. Support helps to heal this vulnerability and re-opens important human connections that sustain our overall well-being. If friends and family members cannot provide this vital link, it is important to find others who can. There are people who are willing to listen; you just have to reach out. PFLAG Canada has Chapters and Contacts in more than 60 communities across Canada. Reaching out is as simple as picking up the phone or attending a Chapter meeting.

We may need support but we can also give it. All members of your family may require a certain amount of support and of course your GLB parent will benefit from knowing that you care.

Hope

As adults we are accustomed to feeling secure in our ability to handle most situations. Rarely, is a new experience completely foreign; most of us have either observed or imagined most of what we expect will happen. It's one of the ways we mentally prepare for life's eventualities. Still, some of us are caught completely off-guard when we realize our mother or father is gay, lesbian or bisexual. It's not easy to be suddenly thrust into a world where there is no reasonable explanation for the confusion that surrounds us. Though it may be hard to see, hope is all around.

Being gay, lesbian or bisexual will not limit the choices or potential of your mother or father. They are still writing their life-story and they are the only ones who can decide where that path will lead. You have an important role to play; your love and support will make it easier for them to rise above the challenges that society will present. Let him or her share who they are as a GLB person, you may have much to learn and perhaps they won't mind teaching you. Your dad or mom has not changed the core of who they are. He or she is the same person you've always known; only now you have an opportunity to know them as they know themselves. Your support will be a gift they will never forget.

Remember, you are not alone; many families survive this situation and emerge closer than ever. There are many resources available online and through your local Chapter of PFLAG Canada. You may wish to speak with a PFLAG Canada Contact or attend a monthly Chapter meeting. It can be helpful to hear how other families have managed. You and your family members will find what you need to move forward; you have already demonstrated that much by coming to this website.

Books Worth Reading

Links to other Support Sites

Reference Information

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