My Brother or Sister is Gay, Lesbian or Bisexual

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Reacting to the news

Your brother or sister has just told you that he or she is gay, lesbian or bisexual (GLB). The news may come as something you've suspected, or as a complete shock. You might sit in silence trying to absorb the information and then, the questions begin to cloud your mind…

1) Have you told our parents?
2) Why are you telling me this?
3) Are you sure?
4) Are you involved with someone?
5) How long have you known?
6) How come you didn't say anything sooner?
7) What else don't I know?

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8) What about AIDS? Are you ill?

9) What are people going to think?

You are not alone. Many GLB include a brother or sister among their trusted confidantes who hear the news first. They are reaching out. They want and need your support as they make the sometimes difficult transition towards living the life that was meant for them. You can help by telling them you'll love and support them no matter what life brings. You may have many questions; they may have but few answers. Be patient; like your brother or sister, you will grow into a new understanding of people who are GLB and the families who love and support them. The fact that you are reading this material says you're well on your way!

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

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.

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 at the same time 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

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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 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 will become clearer, yet many try to bury their natural attractions because they understand society’s views on homosexuality. Some can learn to tune out their inner compass – for a period of time. Inevitably, these feelings resurface in the form of health issues that cannot be ignored. Feelings will always find a way to be heard, even if people are too afraid to listen.

If your brother or sister tells you they are GLB, believe them without doubt. They understand the risk involved with telling people; they know it means their life will change. You can be sure they’ve thought it through quite deliberately.

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How am I supposed to feel?

Some of us feel like a trust has been broken. We may also feel guilty for not figuring things out sooner. Perhaps we could have spared them some of the grief associated with coming-out. Have we let them down?

When something challenges our assumptions, we question our ability see things as they really are. In the case of someone we've grown up with, assumptions are more than "best guesses"; they're like unspoken truths. It's natural to feel a certain amount of self-doubt.

Understanding and accepting our brother or sister may involve refitting our childhood memories into this new reality. Many of us do this without even realizing it. It's part of letting go of the assumptions that have helped us define the past and allowed us to predict the future. Once we've set these aside, having a GLB brother or sister seems far more logical. Many report having a better relationship with GLB family members once they were able to see them as they see themselves. Still, other issues may cause us concern. How will he or she deal with discrimination? What about AIDS? What kind of life can they expect? Many of these fears will pass with time and additional information.

If you are the only one in your family who knows, you have the luxury of working through your thoughts and feelings before others weigh-in with their opinion. However, playing secret keeper is not always easy and you may find yourself isolated from those who typically hear your concerns.

When families hear the news together, they may remain calm, or things could erupt into a multi-generational matching of attitudes and experience. People sometimes impose unrealistic expectations on their loved ones, especially if it concerns the well-being of another.

When a family member comes-out, there are only two choices: to accept and support them, or to lose them from your life. Fortunately, the decision to accept is often obvious, but not always easy. Acceptance becomes easier with time, but it's important to realize that everyone progresses at their own pace.

Sometimes family members are not together in their attitudes; some accept, others do not. The heartbreak of losing a family member impacts each person individually and families sometimes fall apart, parents occasionally get divorced.

What has life been like for him or her?

It is difficult, knowing that you're different but not understanding why. Gay, lesbian and bisexual youth can feel worried, scared and confused, and they may not know where to turn for answers. Understanding and accepting who they are can bring them relief, and peace of mind. Most people just want to know they are normal!

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. A person can be ready to accept who they are, but not ready to deal with the potentially negative fallout. Living with such a secret may cause anxiety, progressing to clinical depression. Revealing this secret to supportive friends and family members can make an enormous difference.

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Some children know they are different as early as age three, but they do not tie their difference to sexual orientation until they're much older. These kids perceive the world differently than their friends. They don't understand why they react differently to common situations. For instance, the classroom gossip may have a different meaning to a GLB youth. Eventually, they may wonder if something is wrong with them.

Adolescents sometimes use drugs, alcohol, the internet, video games, television or others things to escape confusing thoughts and feelings. Realizing they are GLB may empower them to take control of their life. For others, it may compound the fear, especially if they do not anticipate a favorable reaction from friends or family members.

Teens may believe that being GLB will make it difficult for them to realize their goals in life. Marriage and career expectations may seem out of reach for an adolescent who's unaware of their opportunities as a GLB adult. Youth may believe they can set aside their orientation and live as a straight person. They may try to hide it, not just from the outside world but also from themselves. Accepting who they are and gaining the confidence to come-out is very important to the quality of life they will enjoy. Coming-out is not a one-time event. It recurs with every new relationship, workplace environment or social contact. Having a healthy outlook will help them meet these challenges.

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.

Being GLB does not completely define a person; it is but one part of the foundation that supports each person's individuality. There is a wonderful diversity that can be seen in all forms of human behaviour. Whether we are talking about sexual expression, race, ethnicity, or personality, 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.

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Self-acceptance makes a big difference

GLB people who accept their sexual orientation will have greater self-confidence and a better chance of developing their self-worth. If they embrace their sexual orientation as a fully integrated part of who they are, they are less likely to wish they were straight. A strong sense of self-worth will help them meet some of the unique challenges they may face (i.e., discrimination, prejudice, negative attitudes). Without this inner constitution, they may fall into periods of emotional turmoil, wishing they could be something they're not. This cycle will undoubtedly impact on their self-esteem, making it more difficult to achieve their personal goals.

Studies have shown that GLB individuals have higher rates of depression and substance abuse (i.e., alcohol, smoking, drugs) than their straight counterparts. This not only affects their present day state of mind, but it places them at greater risk for developing problems later in life. Drugs and alcohol may become a means of escaping the pressures of being GLB. It's important to recognize these behaviours before they take hold. Although rates may vary, an estimated 30% of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender (GLBT) youth will attempt suicide. They may need some professional counselling to help them accept their sexual identity; otherwise they may see life as an endless struggle.

Whether we are straight, gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender, our sexual identity is a gift. We do not just 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 separate from the whole of who we are.

What might they be thinking?

You may wonder, "Why did he or she have to tell me?" Some family members would rather not know. People come-out for different reasons: they may need emotional support; perhaps they can no longer cope with pretending to be straight; may be 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. They aren't trying to burden you, but they may be looking for a safe and secure connection to the family. Most GLB people assume their parents will take the news hard; some even fear they will lose their family. Here are some of the many concerns your GLB brother or sister may have about telling your parents …

<u>Young Adults</u>:

1) How will they react? (anger, tears, etc.)
2) Will my parents stop loving me?
3) Will they think I'm abnormal? (sick, a freak, stupid)
4) Will they think I'm confused? (too young to know, misguided, influenced by someone else)

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5) Will they throw me out of the house?
6) Will they withdraw their financial support? (university tuition, food, clothes, shelter)
7) Will our home life become unbearable?

Adult Children:

1) Will I lose my relationship with my parents? (cease talking, visiting)
2) How will they treat my partner?
3) How will they judge me?
4) How will they speak about me with other family members? (brothers, sisters, grandparents, adult child's spouse or children)
5) Will they blame themselves? (they may wish to protect their parents)

Young adults may put-off telling their parents until they become independent. Older adults may try to shelter their parents or avoid telling them altogether. The fear of losing important relationships and hurting the people they love, can create a vast distance between parents and their gay, lesbian or bisexual children.

What should I expect from my parents

When your brother or sister finally summons the courage to tell your parents, they will experience a period of adjustment marked by letting go of past assumptions and learning what it means to have a child that is gay, lesbian or bisexual. Though everyone is different, here is an overview the stages most parents experience:

Five Stages of Coming-out for Parents

1) Shock
   i) Lasts anywhere from a few minutes to a couple of weeks
   ii) They may think their child has changed
   iii) Though some parents suspect, hearing the words can still feel like a "jolt" to the senses
2) Denial
   i) Parents may cry; your brother or sister may feel very guilty. Now would be a good time for family members to reach out to support organizations like PFLAG Canada
   ii) They may entertain ideas like, "S/he's just confused" or "They'll change their mind when they meet the right girl (or boy)"
   iii) They may want your brother or sister to see a counsellor. Counseling can be useful for anyone who is struggling with issues pertaining to sexual diversity, but it will not make your sister or brother straight. A professional counselor will not even consider such an idea. Homosexuality is not considered a clinical disorder that merits treatment
   iv) Your parents may not wish to discuss it
   v) Your parents may not react the same way; they may even take different sides

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3) Anger and Guilt

i) It is normal for parents to feel angry. They may direct it towards your GLB brother or sister, his or her friends, their spouse, you or other family members. Anger is usually a demonstration of the fear and guilt they feel for any number of reasons. They could be thinking…

- What did I do wrong?
- Why didn't I see this coming?
- Did something happen during the pregnancy to cause this?
- What else am I going to find out?
- How long did my child suffer before telling me?
- How will others react?
- I am not equipped to handle this

ii) Single parents can experience a greater sense of guilt if they believe their children are in any way disadvantaged. Single parents do not produce more gay or lesbian children than coupled parents

4) Making Decisions - Three Possible Routes:

Once they accept there is no going back, your parents can begin making decisions about the future. The relationship they have with your brother or sister will take one of the following paths:

i) Supportive: When parents focus on the well-being of their child, many other issues become relatively unimportant. This doesn't mean that these parents understand what it means to be GLB or even accept the idea. It simply means that whatever obstacles lie ahead, the health and welfare of their child is of the utmost importance. Such families have an excellent chance of nurturing a healthy attitude in all family members.

ii) In young families, supportive parents set the tone for younger siblings. In older families, they can have a strong positive impact on members of the extended family. Individually, these parents are open to learning and they don't mind searching for information on their own. Supportive parents also support each other and do not face the added discourse of a judgmental partner.

iii) Resigned or Conditionally Supportive: Parents who tolerate their GLB children often think they are accepting because they remain on speaking terms and continue to support their child in other ways. These parents create uncomfortable conditions by imposing restrictions or using sarcasm to communicate their discomfort. Some parents won't allow their child's partner to visit, or they use insensitive humour to embarrass them in front of others. Adult children will spend as little time as possible with their parents; GLB adolescents will keep all details of their life private. Children living in these homes are often afraid their parents will ask them to leave, or cut off any financial support for post-secondary education.

iv) Unsupportive or Judgmental: Parents who do not support their GLB children not only lose a vital connection that is important to their own well-being, they make it hard for their children to transition into a healthy adult life. Some of these parents lose the respect of other family members who support the GLB individual. Parents may withdraw

into a “closet” of their own by avoiding social interaction with friends and family members.

5) Acceptance

A truly accepting parent would rather change society than change their child. Not everyone gets this far; many remain supportive but privately wish their child could become heterosexual. Acceptance means not only accepting your brother or sister, but also accepting themselves as parents of someone who is gay, lesbian or bisexual.

How do I tell my dependant children?

It’s never wrong to tell your dependant children about the status of your brother or sister’s relationship with their partner. You cannot hurt, stigmatize or damage them emotionally, provided you tell them what they need to hear as children, not as adults.

Young children understand that life partners (parents, grandparents, etc.) 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. Telling your young children their aunt or uncle is GLB is no more complicated than letting them know the same bond can exist between two people of the same sex. It will help if your brother or sister has a partner so your children can relate the information to a specific person.

> *“You know that Mommy and I love each other very much. Well uncle Joe and Steve love each other in the same way….Yes, sometimes two men (or two women) fall in love and become part of each other’s family. Steve is part of our family because uncle Joe is my brother and he has decided to be a family with Steve. So, that makes Steve part of our family too.”*

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

> *“Uncle Joe is a gay man, so is his partner Steve.”*

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 parity of a same-sex relationship, but if you accept your brother or sister, so will they.

<u>Things to Remember When Telling Your Children:</u>

1) Make sure you are comfortable with your family member’s sexual orientation before discussing it with your children. It’s okay not to have all the answers, but it’s not okay to have this discussion 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 what that means, use their understanding of your relationship as a guide.

3) Have them explain their questions if you're unsure about what they mean. Kids may not have the vocabulary or life experience to voice their questions clearly.

4) Be aware that teenage boys may worry that homosexuality runs in the family. A gay uncle could mean they might be gay too. Reassure them that they are their own man; 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. Teach them to welcome diversity into their lives through your example; they stand a better chance of becoming self-confident and open-minded adults. We tend to sentence ourselves with the judgments we reserve for others.

How can I help a brother or sister I suspect may be GLB?

Are you prepared to support them if they are gay, lesbian or bisexual? If so, there are ways to communicate your support.

1) Asking them outright is not always the best idea, particularly if he or she is still an adolescent.

   They may not be aware of it themselves; perhaps they are just beginning to question their sexual orientation. "Asking", may force them to face something they are not ready for. You may cause them more harm than good. If you truly believe asking is the best approach, make sure they understand that you support them, even if they deny it or say they're not sure. If they get upset, don't apologize for offending them rather, apologize for prying. Tell them you don't feel there's anything wrong with being gay, lesbian or bisexual.

2) Communicate your support indirectly.

   Comment supportively on a gay-rights issue or a related story in the newspaper; speak kindly of a GLB friend or co-worker and use inclusive language like "partner" instead of boyfriend or girlfriend. Try to observe their reaction but do not comment.

3) Be a friend and tell them you care!

   It's never a bad time to tell a brother or sister that you care and you're willing to listen if they ever want to talk.

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.

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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 sister (or brother), 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 <u>not</u> 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.

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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.

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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 its 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?

Everyone has a better chance of achieving their goals if they accept who they are and surround themselves with people who care. 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 the family that raised them. Anyone who faces prejudice or discrimination is more vulnerable if they do not have a strong support network in place. This is one of the reasons why GLB communities tend to support their own.

Your sister or brother has every right to expect the life of their choosing. Keep in mind, everyone is different; we all have separate expectations (career, marriage, family, etc.) based

on our personality; some goals may be more difficult to achieve than others. They have an excellent chance of accomplishing anything they wish, especially if they surround themselves with people who love and accept them. 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 sustains us intellectually. 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 family member. Living as a “closeted brother or sister” 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.

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 brother or sister will benefit from knowing that you care.

Hope

As adults we are accustomed to feeling secure in our ability to handle most situations. New experiences are rarely ever foreign; most of us have either observed or imagined just about everything we think could possibly happen. It’s one of the ways we mentally prepare for life’s eventualities. Still, some of us are caught completely off-guard when they find out their brother or sister 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. It can be tough to see that hope is all around.

Being gay, lesbian or bisexual will not limit the choices or potential of your brother or sister. 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 brother or sister has not changed; he or she is the same person you’ve always known. You now 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 or 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. Your family members will find what they 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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