

Keeping Love and Family Closeness Alive

At the end of the day, most parents want a strong, close and harmonious family, and their sons or daughters want to know that they are loved and they matter. So often this is turned on its head with the transition parents go through after finding out their kid is gay or lesbian. This phase can be very emotional and if not done well, can lead to important relationships being damaged often taking years to repair. One of the most powerful factors that enable this destruction is homophobia. Fortunately there are ways of recognising it and there are strategies to overcome it so that you and your children have the best shot at staying close.

Once you've gone through the initial reactions to the news that your son or daughter is gay or lesbian and things have settled down a bit, you'll be ready to move into the next phase of adapting to the situation. This means adjusting to them being an integrated part of the family living as a gay or lesbian. Whilst it would be great if everything could be all smiles, hugs and endless moments of unconditional love and acceptance this is just not the reality!

What is homophobia?

One of the biggest things that can sabotage your relationship with your son or daughter can be the inevitable issue of 'homophobia'. This is something that can have a very negative influence not only on your connection with your son or daughter, but it is something that can be at the very core of poor self-esteem and emotional problems for them.

What is homophobia? Well the word sounds like a fear of homosexuality which is partly true but it is much more than that. It is a deeply held belief that homosexuality is deeply and inherently wrong, against nature and disordered. It goes along the lines that if anyone openly lives their life as gay or lesbian, they are destined to have a life of distress, loneliness and they will never be truly happy. This belief is very old and dates back thousands of years and for us has its roots in certain interpretations of the Bible and other cultural influences. So it therefore is a belief that is imbedded in us a deep level and reinforced in our society everywhere we look.

What are the facts about homosexuality?

To make sure that you know the facts, homophobia is irrational and not based in reality. Homosexuality is not a disorder. It has been removed from the book that psychologists and psychiatrists use to diagnose disorders. Professional psychological societies around the world have made statements stating that homosexuality is a valid sexual orientation and in no way a problem in itself. It is a natural part of humanity and has always existed with us and other species. Attempting to change someone's orientation is potentially quite dangerous, as it is similar to saying to a group of white people that they should become black. As hard as they try, they will always be white. Gays, lesbians, bisexuals and transgender people are just as capable of having a good, healthy, successful and happy life as much as anyone. They can make wonderful parents, raise psychologically healthy children, have positive long term committed relationships, and can be role models to others. Homophobia itself is the thing that is disordered, not homosexuality.

We are all constantly immersed in homophobia. Gay and lesbian relationships are generally seen as being second rate and sadly this has a powerfully destructive impact on the lives of gay and lesbian

individuals. For example, gay guys in particular often believe the opinion from society that gay relationships are second rate and short term, which can affect their ability to have long term relationships. Stereotypes about gays and lesbians are as strong today as they've ever been, causing people to be misunderstood and rejected by their peers, work colleagues and families. There are so many myths and stereotypes about being gay or lesbian that for some it is hard for some to be seen as an individual, rather than a label.

What is the impact of homophobic bullying?

Homophobic bullying in the schoolyard still goes on and deeply damages those who experience it, often shaping the rest of their lives and the way they see themselves. This bullying is different to any other type of school yard harassment. For example with racist bullying, the child can go home and feel nurtured and supported by the family who understand their pain and can offer soothing and support. The intense shame that homophobic bullying tends to lead to means that these kids rarely talk to anyone about it, making it doubly damaging to the way they see themselves. Due to the profound nature of this type of bullying, it has usually had a deep effect on anyone who experiences it, and can last them for the rest of their lives. This along with the general homophobia most people experience throughout their adult life means that they in fact develop homophobic beliefs and therefore see themselves as being defective and no good without any sense of having a healthy and bright future. This is called 'internalized homophobia' where a gay or lesbian person is actually homophobic themselves. This can lead to all sort of psychological problems including depression, social exclusion and low self esteem. This has an ongoing and profound effect on the lives of gays and lesbians and can take years to overcome. Of course when a person suffering this sees their parents mirroring homophobic beliefs it can be extremely painful, have a strongly negative influence on them and drive a wedge in your relationship with them.

What can you do about your own homophobic beliefs?

So how do you deal with your own homophobia? Firstly accept that it exists and don't give yourself a hard time about it. It is very rare for someone in our society not to have deeply held negative beliefs about homosexuality. So naturally, even when you think you've come a long way with accepting your son or daughter's sexuality and their partner, your homophobic beliefs will pop up inside of you when you least expect it. This can come in the form of feeling scared that they will inevitably end up living a life of sexual depravity, will have endless short term relationships with abusive partners and end up lonely and old. You might feel a level of disgust and repulsion when imagining them having sex. You could suddenly get angry with them for no apparent reason when they are talking about something that is about their life as it is connected to their sexual orientation. You might want to protect them from having a relationship as you might feel deep down that no matter who their partner is, they won't be good for them. You might believe that 2 guys or women can't have a good long term committed relationship, or you might get upset when your son or daughter is talking about having a child. You could believe that this is pushing the limits way too far and involving innocent kids in a life which is filled with disorder and discrimination. Because you are human you will think all sorts of things that are both rational and irrational, some based on objective truth and other times from gut level anger and fear. So do you just push your homophobia down, ignore it and hope it goes away? This is a strategy most people use but it doesn't work! The reason is that it can affect you emotionally and like anything if you push it away it still exists and can leak

out and affect your feelings and behaviour. It's a bit like me telling you not to picture a red tree, no matter what do not have an image in your mind of a tree with red flowers filling its wide and beautiful canopy. What are you picturing right now?

The other problem with pushing these thoughts and feelings away is that you can end up causing an internal battle inside of yourself which is exhausting and bad for your sense of emotional well-being. The one side can be thinking that you should be caring, accepting, rational and supportive. The homophobic part of you can be saying that you should be protecting them from pain, distress and other gay or lesbian people who could hurt them.

A useful strategy

The trick here is to observe and accept the fact that the homophobic part of you has been triggered. You could even call this part of yourself a name or use a couple of words to describe it such as 'homophobic Mary or Bob'. Rather than getting angry or upset with yourself about this part of you, accept that it is there and remember that it is very natural that it is there given our upbringing. Recognise that if you allow yourself to feel, act and think from this particular position that you could end up doing some damage. So when talking to your son or daughter, ask yourself: if I react from this homophobic part of me, where will it get me and my relationship with my son or daughter?" You can then connect with the more caring, unconditionally loving parent side of you and think, feel and behave from this part of you.

This may take some practice and be careful to not lay in the boots into yourself if you make a mistake. Remember that you are human and not an Indian Deity! Communication with your son or daughter is also important, and this can include talking about the homophobia issue with them so they understand why you sometimes might respond irrationally. They can also call you on it if they think you are responding from a homophobic place.

The other thing to do is to become aware of the thoughts you have when you are responding from the homophobic side. Make sure you are open to observing every thought and feeling you have and write it down in a journal which is kept private. Write down every irrational thought and feeling as unpleasant and difficult as it may feel. Then later, come back to the journal and ask questions of the statements you've written down using questions such as: "where is the evidence?" and "how logical is that?" Replace the irrational words with ones that make more sense and based in reality.

If you are still struggling, it may be beneficial for you or you and your son or daughter to speak with a psychologist who specialises in this area so you can have an objective third party working with you to overcome sometimes very intense emotional reactions to these issues.

So keep observing and challenging this irrational part of yourself through talking, reading and your connection with PFlag. Once you've made progress on this issue, you'll be a wonderful model for those other parents who are still struggling. Even when things appear to be hopeless, keep in mind that love is what binds families together through the medium of communication. If you persist, try not to give yourself a hard time and focus on the strategies above

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