

HELP FOR FRIENDS AND FAMILIES OF GAYS

Someone you love has announced they are gay. Now what?

Most people are totally unprepared for the discovery that someone close to them is gay. Whether the confession comes from a son or daughter, husband, wife or a close friend, the reaction is often the same: "What do I say to them now?" "How can I help?" And sometimes, "Could I be partly to blame for this situation?" Yet this is a common occurrence in families today. A son or daughter comes home from college and tells their parents of their involvement in a gay lifestyle, or a married businessman with children confesses to his wife that he's been actively homosexual for several years.

While each situation is different, they have one thing in common: the person hearing the news is faced with choices of how he or she is going to respond to the gay individual. Recognizing the confusion and bewilderment that can overwhelm someone at this time, we've put together a few guidelines on how to respond to the person who has informed you of his or her homosexuality.

Remain as calm as possible.

The discovery of someone's homosexuality usually sets off an emotional reaction of panic that makes you think the whole world is falling apart. It's not. At this point, it helps to focus on the question, "What does this person need from me now?" This initial disclosure is not the time to dwell on your own fears and insecurities. There will be plenty of time to deal with those things later.

Communicate acceptance.

Don't reject the gay person. This individual needs your love and acceptance at this point more than they've ever needed it. You may be feeling totally bewildered—like that loveable, familiar person who you thought you knew so intimately has suddenly turned into a monster. Rest assured, they haven't. With as much acceptance and grace as you can muster (prayer is essential here), reaffirm your love for them. They don't need rejection or harsh, angry lectures.

Love unconditionally.

You are probably wondering, "But isn't homosexuality sin? Don't I need to say how wrong it is?" Yes, but we'll get to that later. The main thing at this time is to direct your energies toward loving that person unconditionally. It won't

come naturally in most cases, so you have to call on God, drawing strength from Him.

Confront in love.

Most people would tend to put this step first, substituting "anger" for "love". That is why we stress the need for affirming our love and acceptance of the gay person. But the truth is that homosexuality is contrary to God's Word. It is sin and it brings destructive effects on the individual and on those close to them. After you have successfully communicated your love and acceptance, and the person knows you are not going to withdraw your support, then you are ready to share your own views. This is especially true if the person is a Christian. This can be done in a gentle way, taking care not to "beat them over the head" with Scriptures.

Instil hope for change.

Along with loving confrontation, you need to hold out an alternative to homosexuality, which is the love of Jesus Christ and His power to redeem and recreate the individual. It's good to have something concrete to give them - some tapes they can listen to, the phone number of an ex-gay Christian they can call, or a brochure from a ministry to homosexuals.

Be part of a supportive community.

The initial disclosure and response is just the beginning. The person with homosexual problems is going to need faithful, consistent love and support. The gay world is full of change, instability, unkept promises and broken relationships. You can provide a listening ear, a place of warmth, security and wholesomeness that sin can't offer. Practical things you can do include verbally telling that person you love them, and showing them your love by writing letters, phoning periodically, and inviting them over for dinner.

Handling your own reaction.

Your first encounter with the subject of homosexuality may result in some distressing and confusing reactions on your part. Don't feel guilty for having problems of your own. Most people do have some difficulty dealing with the confession of homosexuality by someone they care about. There are some principles that will help you in working through these reactions.

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Don't take it personally.

This is a common reaction. Sometimes, a gay person will be disclosing his past with intent to hurt you or get you to share the blame for their current situation. But this is not usually the case. More often, the person shares with you in an attempt to become closer. Either way, try to look at their homosexuality as a simple fact: "This is how it is." It is not something intended to hurt you, incriminate or embarrass you, or to be a statement about you in any way. This problem of "taking it personally" is especially felt by parents and spouses of gays. They are particularly vulnerable because some of their actions may have had some influence on this situation.

Homosexuality has such deep and extensive causes that no one individual can hold themselves responsible for "making another person gay". It will help if you get this firmly established in your mind. You are not to blame for your loved one's homosexual problems.

Disgust, Fear.

Some people, upon learning of the homosexuality of someone close will actually become physically ill. These violent emotional and physical symptoms are a common reaction to homosexuality. However, a message that many Christians are reluctant to learn is that it is not acceptable to allow the attitudes behind these feelings to remain a part of your life, influencing the way you treat people from a homosexual background.

It is regrettable that Christians who whole-heartedly believe in treating alcoholics, prostitutes and even murderers with the love of Christ will see two homosexuals walking down the street and say, "Get a load of those two queers!" What is even more tragic is that these Christians will feel completely justified in having this attitude!

This attitude is not pleasing to God. The Lord does judge and condemn homosexual acts, but Christ never treated those caught in sexual sin in such a debasing way. Consider how Jesus treated the Samaritan woman at the well and the woman caught in adultery (John chapters 4 and 8). While the Pharisees—the religious men of that time—looked on such people with contempt, Christ forgave them. Although Jesus confronted them with their sin and in no way condoned it, He was more concerned with meeting the needs of their hearts and setting them free to live productive and fulfilling lives.

We need to have this attitude in ministering to those with homosexual problems. If you don't have, if you are overwhelmed with feelings of fear and repulsion, be honest with yourself and God! Bring these things before the Lord in prayer, asking Him to give you a change of heart. He'll do it!

It may take time, however. Be patient with yourself and persistent in prayer, and you will see changes.

Overreaction: Dealing with the grief process.

For some, this is an experience that can have as great (or even greater) an impact than if a close friend or relative had died. In fact, it is not uncommon for a person to go through the same grief process that occurs when someone dies; the sense of loss can be that great. What triggers the grief process is the realization that something or someone of extreme value has been irretrievably lost to you in some capacity, maybe forever. Allow yourself to grieve.

Knowing when to let go.

To understand what relinquishment is, we must first understand what God is like and what is the essence of His relationship to us. As He is to us, so must we be (as far as possible) to those close to us.

Relinquishment does not mean that we abandon the person or neglect our responsibilities towards them. It does mean forsaking the right to be proud. We can't demand that this person fulfil our dreams for them. It means being willing to forego any repayment for the good we have done for this person. It means giving up our right to uninterrupted tranquillity.

Most important and most difficult of all, relinquishment means allowing our loved ones to face pain, tragedy and even death, and allowing them to accept the consequences of their own actions.

Be prepared, God may use you!

The experiences you have been through will not be wasted. God places great value on endurance through suffering. In the Old Testament, Moses and Joseph were among those who experienced great suffering and the Epistles of the New Testament leave little doubt about the hardship and pain endured by the apostle Paul. "These have come so that your faith—of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire—may be proven genuine and may result in praise, glory and honour when Jesus Christ is revealed."

No one is better equipped to ministering a given area than one who has "been there." If you remain open to God and are willing to be used, you will probably find many opportunities to "comfort with the same comfort you have received from God." In fact, the joy that comes from ministering to those in need can be the greatest tool God uses to bring healing to your own life!

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