

Understanding the struggle around sexual orientation

A ten-year-old boy comes home from school upset. He was the last one picked for a recess-time basketball team and called a "sissy" by another boy. He didn't know the definition of the word, but he could tell by the tone of the other boy that it was not a compliment.

Later he would learn the meaning and hope that he would never be called that again.

This young boy grows into a teen, never gaining any athletic aptitude but instead prefers to apply his talents elsewhere. An incredible singer, he prefers the bright lights of the stage to the basketball court.

The taunts, however, are harsher, meaner, and filled with hatred, but this young man is undeterred. He continues to hone his craft and



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finds a great network of support within his own school in the form of its Gay/Straight Alliance or GSA for short.

GSAs are a place for students of any sexual orientation or gender identity to commune and offer support to each other within their school environment, which is often a place of harassment for students who present as "other" than the masses.

In contrast, a young girl who enjoys playing sports can often be referred to as a "tomboy," most notably by her proud parents who find it cute that she can give the boys her age a run for their money out on the field.

As she reaches puberty, however, she is expected to perhaps maintain her athletic ability while becoming more interested in "girly" things such as makeup, boys, and the "Twilight" series of books and movies. If she does not follow suit, the epithets she might endure hearing are equally as ill-spirited as the ones hurled at boys, intended to hurt, degrade, and send a message that who she is is "not good enough."

As a result, her self-esteem might be diminished, causing her to feel badly about herself, and possibly might result in behaviors that are unsafe, like using drugs or alcohol, self-injuring or sexual promiscuity. Studies have shown that gay-identified teen suicide attempts are four times that of heterosexual-identified youths.

What happens during childhood and adolescence shapes who we become as adults. For some, forming a sexual orientation or gender identity that is different than the "norm" can happen easily, without much agitation or stress. For most, however, the process of figuring out who one is in terms of sexual orientation or gender identity/expression is not easy, and is often a source of intense struggle and conflict that can take many years to overcome.

Even adults can find themselves in conflict over their sexual orientation or gender identity. We have often read of the ultra-conservative public figure that was found to have had a homosexual relationship unbeknownst to a spouse or followers.

What causes one person to struggle or live in conflict while another might accept who they are with ease? A variety of factors come into play. Homophobia comes in many forms and is often internalized in the same way that racism may be internalized by people of color.

If one is told from an early age by parents, loved ones, or even religious figures, that homosexuality is wrong or a "sin," he/she will believe it and do all in their power not to be what is so reviled, despite the knowledge that the innate physiological mechanism that attracts one person to another cannot be changed.

If one is taught to believe that being gay is wrong but are attracted to people of the same gender, how could it be reconciled without deep conflict? Conversely, those who are raised in families, communities, and religious institutions where all people are accepted, regardless of sexual orientation and gender identity/expression, are more likely to accept and love themselves without internal conflict getting in the way.

In recent years, celebrities have been coming out with little consequence to their careers. Elton John, Ellen DeGeneres, Ricky Martin, and Neil Patrick Harris have all come out and continued to achieve great success in the entertainment industry. Despite their personal struggles, each made a decision to publicize their sexual orientation at a time that was comfortable for them.

More recently Chastity Bono, the only child from the marriage of singer/actress Cher and her late ex-husband Sonny Bono, who had come out as lesbian in the mid 1990s, came out as transgendered, underwent

gender reassignment surgery, and legally changed his name to Chaz, putting a celebrity face to an often misunderstood gender identity.

Celebrities who are willing to come out and publicly identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual and transexual (LGBT), perform a service to those who may still be struggling to come to terms with this aspect of their identity. It might be easier for someone to come out if his/her favorite actor, singer, or athlete is openly gay.

As GSAs gain more acceptance in schools across the country with the support of Gay/Lesbian Student Education Network (GLSEN), an organization that works to put an end to discrimination, harassment, and bullying based on sexual orientation or gender identity/expression in K-12 schools, students are finding greater support and ease in accepting themselves in terms of their sexual orientation or gender identity/expression.

Adults who are questioning their sexual orientation or gender identity into their 30s, 40s, 50s and beyond, may have difficulty locating and cultivating a peer group, particularly if they have been married or don't know how to begin the process of exploration. Online support groups, message boards, and chat rooms might be a way to get started.

Social interaction and support, particularly through a time of great questioning and transition, is essential in helping people feel that they are not alone in their quest for exploration, comfortability and potential resolution to their sexual orientation/gender identity crisis.

No matter where one is on the sexual orientation or gender identity/expression continuum, he/she should be afforded the opportunity to understand, explore, and accept without fear or self-loathing. For some, the formation of a sexual orientation or gender identity is without thought or worry. For others, though, it can take much more thought and time.

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