

Different in More Ways Than One.

Providing Guidance for Teenagers on Their Way to Identity, Sexuality and Respect

I Coming Out and Identities

Why did he even mention the existence of the sports group to Jan? And he really did come, can you believe it?

Jan makes him so completely confused, it would be better if he had never come to Amsterdam. At first Mark was quite happy to finally have another enthusiastic and talented swimmer in his class, and not to be the only one.

Two young guys are hanging out outside his house in the housing estate, nonchalantly walking around. They were obviously waiting for him. For days now, they have been following him around, yelling stupid comments. I'll just pretend they're not really here. He crosses the street, seemingly indifferent to their taunts, and heads for his door. Peter is standing in his way, with an evil grin on his face. Mark gulps, doesn't see Peter and suddenly bumps into him.

"Hey, you fucking faggot, don't think I'll let one of your kind grope me like that!" sneers Peter, taking one step towards Mark.

"Shut up, damn it!" screams Mark. Peter and Freek back off, bewildered. It doesn't even take two seconds for Mark to turn the key in the lock and open the door. Furious, he slams it shut after him.

"Mark, what's wrong? Your father is trying to recover from his shift!"

Mark doesn't even bother to look at his mother. Could the whole world please leave him alone?

"Mark, I am speaking to you." Mum is holding him by the sleeve.

"You know what? Living in this shitty place is so bloody brilliant!" Mark snaps back at her through clenched teeth. He tears himself loose quickly and runs into his room.

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Framework

First of all

One of the main differences between homophobia and other forms of discrimination like sexism and racism is that homosexual orientation is not visible unless a person decides to make it visible. Social scientists call this phenomenon an “invisible stigma”, as opposed to a “visible stigma” like a person’s sex or race. To avoid possible hostile reactions, lesbians and gays often have to make a decision concerning the visibility of their homosexuality.

'Coming out' is the term used for the way lesbians, gays and bisexuals are open about their feelings. Coming out is viewed as a part of a larger process of identity management - through which people learn how to deal with the social stigma attached to their feelings - which is very important for the development of a strong self-esteem for lesbians, gay men and bisexuals. This complex interactive process takes place between the individual and society as a whole.

For lesbian women and gay men coming out is not a decision made once and for all; it is rather a continuous series of decisions which usually starts when a teen acknowledges her/his same-sex attraction as a valid emotion. They then have to make the decision whether or not to come out every time they meet a new person.

Basic information

Puberty is a crucial moment in the self-development of every human being. As heterosexual teenagers start to experience their sexuality and romantic feelings with the other sex, homosexual teenagers feel left out. The social pressure concerning gender roles is extremely strong and people whose identity does not fit the model have the impression that they don't have a place in their everyday world and can feel lonely, confused, “abnormal”. This can sometimes even lead to suicide. In their helplessness, some lesbians and gays feel forced to choose between a hetero/homosexual double life or a public coming out.

This process of coming out is influenced by a number of variables: gender, ethnic group, environment (urban versus rural), values and attitudes of contemporary society, individual aspects and physical ability. The way girls and boys are socialised into traditional gender roles has an influence on their coming out. Many counsellors note that girls often realise their same-sex attraction following an ‘intimate’ or ‘romantic’ crush for another girl, while boys more often realise it following a more explicit feeling of sexual attraction.

Role models for lesbians, gays and bisexuals in general are already not very numerous, but this problem can be even more pronounced for migrants. There are virtually no public figures from ethnic minorities who are openly homosexual for young people to identify with. The lack of role models contributes to feelings of isolation and low self-esteem among many lesbians and gays. Being lesbian and gay while at the same time being a member of an ethnic minority means that one will have to deal with multiple discrimination. A lesbian of colour, for instance, will have to cope with the impact of racism, sexism and homophobia.

However, there is a difference between a minority status linked to one's sexual orientation and that linked to ethnic origin. Lesbian women and gay men are born and grow up in families that hadn't foreseen their sexual orientation and often react to it by showing negative feelings (fear, disgust, hatred, sense of guilt). Parents of gays and lesbians frequently mourn the heterosexual life they had imagined for their child. In the case of ethnic origin, a family may show intense pride in its cultural background and therefore support and empower the child in her/ his identity.

What does this mean for me?

Educators and counsellors should be aware that coming out is a personal choice and a continuous process. As such, it is important to deal respectfully with a young person's decision. In order to provide adequate support, it would be preferable to create a secure and empathic atmosphere in which teens will talk freely about their needs. They should be supported and empowered in managing their feelings and identities.

An important piece of advice is to respect the emotions of the teen and to accept them for what they are. Counsellors and educators should accept the self-definitions of the client or pupil without questioning them. Remember however that there is a small number of people who have sex with others of their own gender but do not define themselves as homosexual. It is therefore important to understand what they mean with the words they use to describe who they are (i.e. why they don't identify as homosexual).

Education

Bear in mind

- What do you think about students coming out of the closet in your class? Is it something you consider important for lesbian and gay pupils? Are you afraid of it? Would you have a positive response to it?
- A teenager should not be forced to come out to her/his classmates. It must be the young person's own decision because it will profoundly affect her or his life.
- Consider the difficulties faced by people of different cultural backgrounds during the coming out process.
- How do you think your students would react to the coming out of one of their classmates? What would the atmosphere in the classroom be like? Would a student dare to show her homosexuality?
- If you think that coming out is in principle no longer a problem in your context, could you identify the 5-10% lesbian and gay students of your school?
- Do you know why your students may react negatively towards this theme? Remember that they are busy trying to build up their own identity, and it is disturbing if they are confronted with someone who is not following the rules of the majority. This then questions the direction of their own development.

Education

Tools

Me / Not Me-Game

Aim: Experience the different layers of being in a majority or minority. Find out similarities and differences.

Method: Prepare a list of words with “who“-questions (for instance, Who has smoked at least once in his/her life? Who has ever taken the bus without paying? Who has ever kissed a girl or woman? Who has ever kissed a boy or man? Who knows personally a lesbian girl/ woman or a gay boy/ man? Who would enter a lesbian café? Who would go to a gay nightclub? and other questions concerning the topics of love, partnership and sexuality). The participants walk through the room and are asked these different questions. Two opposite walls in the room are marked with the possible answers “Me“ and “Not me“, each one on a sheet of paper. An “in between” answer is not possible. The participants are asked before the exercise to choose one side even though it can be difficult. The pupils are asked not to talk or make comments during the exercise. It is more about perceiving the situation created by answering to a specific question and experiencing the picture of people distributed in the room.

The participants have to separate after each question into two groups: On the one side those who answer by “Me“ and all the others on the opposite “Not me“-side. Every participant considers the image, looks at who is on the other side and who is next to him/her, and pays attention to what she or he is feeling inside. Then everybody walks in the room until the next question is asked. Important note: the students should be allowed to lie, which means that nobody is forced to tell the truth when answering a question. Which is why the last question should be: “Who has lied at least once during this game?“ After the questions there should be a group discussion dealing with the feelings of the participants during the exercise, if they noticed something or if they felt surprised at a certain moment, etc.

Please note: In this game pupils can experience the situation of those lesbians, gay men and bisexuals who are hiding an important part of their life. It is important for the teacher to play along and answer the questions by moving to one side of the classroom. The teacher should also finish the session by answering to the last question “Who did not tell the truth at least once during this game?“ by saying “Me”, otherwise most pupils will not dare to say that they lied perhaps once or twice themselves.

V.I.P. Guessing

Aim: To find out why people are interested in the sexual orientations of others.

Method: The pupils have to identify V.I.P.s (Very Important Persons – rock stars, actors, politicians, etc.) that they know are gay, lesbian or bisexual. Where did they get this information? Was the V.I.P.’s career affected after their sexual identity was made public? Was it the V.I.P.’s own decision to come out in public? Why are the pupils interested in that?

Please note: The teacher does not have to know whether the V.I.P.s named by the students are indeed gay/lesbian or not. The exercise is more about how someone knows (or thinks she/he knows) that a V.I.P. is for instance a lesbian and why this is considered to be interesting to others. It is very important to mention that this method is NOT about outing V.I.P.s.

Imagine...

Aim: To understand why the coming out process can be very difficult for lesbians, gays and bisexuals

Method: Pupils divide into small groups of boys or girls. In these groups, they have to imagine what would change in their life if they were gay or lesbian. Give the small groups time to think about this. How would they deal with it? How would their friends react? Are these positive or negative images? Why? Why not?

Please note: This method can be embarrassing for homosexual pupils, especially if they have not come out, so this method should be used carefully. If someone has difficulty imagining being gay, tell them to imagine that everyone was homosexual and only a few people were straight. What would that be like for those few people?

Alternative suggestion: have the students read an extract of an autobiography by a gay or lesbian author.

Education

F.A.Q.s (Frequently Asked Questions)

Please also refer to the F.A.Q.s for the counselling and health care sector.

How do teenagers come to realise that they are gay, lesbian or bisexual?

Most gays, lesbians and bisexuals realise it just the way heterosexual teenagers realise that their romantic feelings and sexual desire are directed towards the other sex. This process starts earlier than one might think, around the onset of puberty. Sometimes it takes more time to acknowledge these feelings, especially if they are repressed.

How does the environment react when a person comes out?

There is no straightforward answer to this, since each situation is vastly different from the next. If a lesbian girl or gay boy thinks that homosexuality is something to be ashamed of there is a good chance that her/his internalised homophobia comes from her or his non-supportive family or environment, and that coming out would be met with hostile reactions. Conversely, if a person is open and feels at ease, the environment will probably respond positively.

Why is someone gay, lesbian, hetero- or bisexual?

To this day, there is no exact scientific answer to the question. The most currently given explanation is a genetic one mixed with some social influences, but nobody is really sure. It seems that sexual orientation is the result of a complex mix of biological, psychological, social and cultural factors. You might want to question the obsession over finding a cause for homosexuality and not for heterosexuality.

How do I deal with a teenager who comes out in the classroom?

It seldom happens that a teenager comes out in class. If it does happen, it would be helpful to talk as frankly as possible about it in front of the class. The student in question should be consulted in advance and asked if this is alright with her or him. When discussing the subject in class, do not refer directly to the pupil who has come out, but speak in more general terms. Increasing people's knowledge about gays, lesbians and bisexuals is a crucial point in combating their exclusion.

I must think about something else. Do my maths homework or perhaps phone Mareike. Irene still thinks that she fancies me. Alright, then...

He stares at the telephone, dials Mareike's number, hears her voice and hangs up right away. He runs back to the door and locks it.

He sees Jan smiling at him and hugging him at the end of the game. A kiss on the right, a kiss on the left, they all say goodbye in the same way. Only Mark's heart starts fluttering madly, his whole body is as though electrified when he feels Jan's body so close to his own. I must have gone completely mad, thinks Mark, hopeless. A bloke shouldn't be able to turn me on like that. It's Mareike's voice, not his hug that should make me feel this way. I can't go to school any more. I must avoid Jan.

"Mark, could I please talk to you after the lesson?" That's the last straw. His mother receiving a letter from the school yesterday – telling her that due to frequent absences Mark might not be allowed to move up into the higher class – was already bad enough. And now the teacher wants something from him. Mark can already imagine what it will be.

He should not have yelled at Jan, let alone push him away so roughly. The fact that Jan had hugged him so enthusiastically when they had won could not excuse his reaction. But the worst was the way in which Jan had looked at him, and then without a word turned on his heel and walked away. Mark's stomach turns over every time he thinks about it. The whole hour long, Mark keeps staring at Jan's empty chair and doesn't manage to think clearly. Jan's face has been haunting his dreams for weeks, turning him on, and his heart starts to beat wildly when he sees Jan, even from a distance.

"We've got to talk, right away," says the teacher to Mark. "Since the school year has started, you have become another person. You play truant, you'll barely let anyone at school talk to you, and now this. I would have thought you'd be pleased to have a fellow swimmer in the class, and that you and Jan would become best friends."

"A super-swimmer he might be, but that's not enough", replies Mark hotly "I just don't want him to touch me like that!"

"Mark, you must apologise to Jan!" The teacher looks at Jan, pensive.

"Having hugged you doesn't mean Jan is gay. And even if he was, I won't tolerate homophobia, or any other type of discrimination."

Homophobia, homophobia, the word is pounding in Mark's head, and suddenly he begins to cry.

"Come on now, what's wrong with you?" The voice of Mr van der Kolk sounds bewildered.

He holds Mark by the shoulders, cautiously. "You have always been such a keen student. And being homophobic simply isn't like you. Jan has enough problems as it is, what with being new in this school and everything. And he likes you, I noticed it from the very first day. Mark, I expect an explanation for your behaviour in front of the whole class. You will face up to your responsibility, is that clear?"

to be continued next page

“Jan likes you, just you.” The teacher’s voice goes on and on in Mark’s head.

“Mark?”

“I can’t do it.” Mark’s voice trembles.

“Then you will have to speak to our school psychologist. This thing with Jan, your absences, all that must be sorted out. Quickly.”

The school psychologist looks friendly. “Among other things, I insulted and pushed back a schoolmate, that’s why I am here.”

Mr de Vries nods almost imperceptibly. “What happened?”, he asks as Mark stops speaking.

“Why does he have to touch me when I win?” cries Mark. “If he had only kept his hands to himself.” He stops, despaired.

“Is it because he hugged you that you lashed out at him?”

Mark nods silently.

“Perhaps it was important for Jan to show you how proud he was of your performance, because he likes you. There’s nothing abnormal about that, Mark, don’t you think?”

“No”, yells Mark, and runs to the door. “It’s absolutely not normal, it’s perverse.”

Nobody knows what he’s going through. Peter and Freek wouldn’t hesitate to beat him up, if he ever... Best not to think about it. He must go through ten sittings with the school psychologist – that was the agreement with Mr van der Kolk.

“Nice to see you again”, greets him Mr de Vries.

Mark nods silently. How could he make it clear to the advisor, that at night he dreams of Jan, that he even has erections because of him, and that at the same time he would most of all like to shake him off?

“Here you can say anything you want, however crazy it might be”, says Mr de Vries quietly, suddenly breaking into Mark’s chaos.

“I don’t even understand myself. I didn’t mean to hurt Jan, but ...”.

Desperately, Mark wipes off his tears with his pullover sleeve.

“But he confuses you quite a lot?” The school psychologist’s question sounds almost like a statement.

Mark looks at him quickly. How did he understand that? “I think about him all the time”, slips out of him so suddenly that he does not have the time to reconsider it.

“You like him so much that it makes you scared, is that right?”

“Yes”, whispers Mark in tears. At last he has told someone about it. He takes a quick glance at the psychologist. He still looks ever so friendly.

“You are not the only guy to fall in love with other guys, Mark.”

“You don’t mean that seriously.”

“I know how difficult it is to speak about being in love with boys. But you are not alone. There is even a gay and lesbian group for young people, here in Amsterdam. I am quite sure that they would be happy to meet you. Maybe you’d like to take their brochure “Boys who fancy boys”. You just have to call them. Think about it Mark, will you? If you need me give me a call, okay?” Mark doesn’t look at the psychologist. But he nods.

the end

Counselling and Health Care

Bear in mind

- How do you view the effects of discrimination on a lesbian or gay teenager? What does it mean to have homoerotic desires in this particular teenager's cultural background?
- What do you think about sexual orientation? Is 'orientation' for you the same as 'preference', 'identity', 'labelling' or 'behaviour', or do you normally differentiate between these aspects?
- Pay attention to what you are saying next time you talk about homosexuality. Do you feel at ease when using the different terms mentioned above and do you take them into account?
- How would you deal with, for instance, a boy who has sex with other boys yet defines himself as heterosexual? Would you consider him to be a gay boy who does not accept himself or just someone who is searching for his own identity?
- Counsellors may be aware of the challenges facing teenagers in western culture, but what about those facing a gay or lesbian adolescent belonging to an ethnic minority?
- What is your own attitude towards the coming out process? Do you consider it to be important? How do you deal with a lesbian or gay teenager who is afraid of coming out?

Counselling and Health Care Tools

A Lesbian Woman/ A Gay Man Is...

Issue: Internalised homophobia prevents gays, lesbians and bisexuals from feeling at ease with their own identity and forces them to keep their sexual orientation hidden from everybody at all costs.

Practical Advice: Suggest to the teenage client that they say the following sentence out loud: “a lesbian woman/ gay man/ bisexual is...”, and then have them complete it by adding whatever comes into their mind. The client repeats the sentence several times until a variety of statements have come out. This allows the teenager to work on the stereotypes and prejudice they have internalised. For instance, one lesbian teen said to her counsellor: “A lesbian woman is ... not feminine; that’s disgusting”.

Please note: before using this exercise, it is necessary to establish an interaction to help the person feel at ease so that she/ he can be open; it is useful to start by saying that anything the client is going to say is acceptable.

The Two Chairs

Aim: work on an individual’s indecision on whether or not to come out. The purpose of this activity is to investigate the reasons why a person chooses (or does not choose) to come out. It also looks at the feelings related to those reasons.

Method: Put a chair in front of the young person and ask him/her to imagine that a part of him-/herself is seated there. Explain that this is the part which is undecided about whether or not they should come out, and leads him/her to hide their sexual orientation. The client must then address this alter-ego. Afterwards, the client moves and sits on that chair him-/herself and try to explain how they feel after listening to the other self.

Please note: Be sure that the client looks at both the positive and negative sides of their possible coming out.

This exercise may be suitable when a client has already questioned the cognitive aspects involved with coming out but still has problems dealing with the emotional aspects. It cannot, therefore, be used as a starting exercise.

Coming Out in the Family

Aim: to work on the decision to come out.

Method: Let a gay/lesbian client imagine they come out to their family. How would they do it? What would they say? What do they think their parents’ reaction would be? How would they react themselves? How do they feel while doing the exercise?

Please note: Do not try to convince the client that they should come out. Even if this method works well for them, it still has to be the client’s own decision. This exercise is limited to focusing on cognitive aspects.

Counselling and Health Care

F.A.Q.s (Frequently Asked Questions)

Please also refer to the F.A.Q.s for the education sector.

What if a teen asks me as a counsellor whether he/she is gay/lesbian? Are there any indicators?

Lesbian women and gay men are as much a mixed group as heterosexual men and women and homosexuality is not identifiable from physical or personality features. The counsellor should ask the teens what they feel, what they are thinking, so as to support them without judgement or any ready-built answers. It could also be useful to ask them whether they are afraid of being homosexual and if so, why they are afraid of it.

Do people choose to be gay or lesbian?

No. Being homosexual rather than heterosexual is not a choice; a gay or lesbian individual can only decide whether they will come out to others or not.

Are parents to blame for their children's homosexuality?

No, certainly not (and in any case homosexuality is not something you should be ashamed of). Mothers and fathers have no influence on a child's sexual orientation but they can encourage their children's self-esteem and independent sexuality. In fact, gays and lesbians are usually born to heterosexual parents and the children of gay and lesbian couples are often heterosexual.

How should I react if for example a young man has sex with other men but defines himself as heterosexual?

Sexual orientation is composed of erotic attraction, sexual behaviour, sexual fantasies, falling in love, self-definition, and social preference. These dimensions do not always coincide; there are indeed a few people who have sex with others of their own gender but do not define themselves as gay. The counsellor must accept the client's own self-definition without questioning it while at the same time trying to understand the underlying representations.

In any case, self-definition as a gay or lesbian may be irrelevant in some cultures.

“And then I told my best friend that I only feel attracted to women. It was such a hurdle to take to tell her that I’m a lesbian and yet it was such a relief to be open about it. Even today it can still be difficult to tell other people but I now know it makes life easier for you.”

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