

Suicide Prevention – How Social Workers Help: Preventing Suicide in Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender Youth

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Introduction

Heterosexism and homophobia are rampant in society. GLBT (gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender) youth are often secretly wrestling with issues to do with their sexual orientation, issues that they dare not share. If they are closeted, they constantly hear prejudicial remarks and cruel jokes about people of their own kind. They hear about and beatings and hate crimes against gays and lesbians. Their own parents may express such attitudes as may their church. Living with such a secret can be soul destroying.

Research shows that adolescents who report same-sexual orientation also report significantly more substance abuse, depression, and other emotional problems as compared to heterosexual adolescents. Research has further shown that suicide attempts are significantly associated with psychosocial stressors, including gender nonconformity, in conjunction with early awareness of being gay or lesbian.

Harassment at School

Mistreatment of youths who are different is almost a rite of passage in the American school. Youths who are taunted in this manner lose confidence and, in turn, become even more vulnerable by virtue of their anxieties and loneliness. Teachers often turn away; most gay and lesbian teachers do not offer support for fear of losing respect or their jobs.

The Gay Lesbian and Straight Education Network (GLSEN) conducted a national survey in 2005 on school bullying (at www.glsen.org). The most commonly reported reason for harassment by peers was body size and the second most common was for gender nonconformity and sexual orientation. The survey further showed that 75% of students had heard anti-gay epithets at school and that around 65% of the gay and lesbian teens reported verbal or physical harassment. These numbers are significantly below those of previous years, a probable sign that anti-bullying initiatives in the schools are achieving some success.

More attention is paid to bullying of kids today than formerly, perhaps as a result of the murder/suicide rampage that took place at Columbine and other schools. The mass killings that took place marked the fourth time during the prior two years that a student-on-student attack in U.S. public schools involved students who were harassed by anti-gay taunting and other bullying.

Many researchers agree that the prevalence of homophobia in the schools is by far the single most damaging influence on lesbian, gay, and bisexual youth. High levels of personal prejudice, ignorance, and fear result in negligible intervention by teachers, counselors, administrators, and school board members when homophobic attacks occur.

Home and Religious Life

Home life for sexually nonconforming youth can be extremely hurtful as well. Parental pressure to conform may be reinforced by sibling teasing and put-downs. A family support system is thus lacking as is support from the usual support systems to which young people can turn. Gay adolescents who "come out" may experience great family discord, rejection, and personal threats. It would make sense to conclude that homosexuality is an important risk factor for adolescent suicide.

Children growing up as gay and lesbian in strict religious families are apt to experience dissonance between their spirituality and sexuality; sometimes the guilt feelings are overwhelming. The religious right has a harmful effect in preventing school systems from addressing the very issue that is risking children's lives.

Transgendered children are in the worst situation of all. By definition they despise their bodies and believe themselves to be in the wrong body. There is little understanding of this condition although brain research probably holds the answer. Psychiatrists label this condition as a mental disorder—gender identity disorder. (For a more accepting view visit www.transfamily.org.)

In all these discordant gender identity situations, not surprisingly, the suicide rate is disproportionately high. Being GLBT in-and-of-itself is not the cause of the increase in suicide. The increased risk comes of course from the psychosocial stress and internalized homophobia associated with the overwhelming and almost constant pressure to be what one is not.

Homelessness

Homelessness is a real problem for gay and lesbian youth who come out to their parents. In the U.S., an estimated 125,000 homeless teenagers identify themselves as

gay or lesbian, and half of them say they were thrown out of their homes. Some of the parents tried to force them to be “reprogrammed” as heterosexual first.

Life on the streets places these children at high risk of involvement in illicit drugs and prostitution. There are very few homeless shelters or refuges specifically for gay and lesbian youth in the U.S. In Britain GLBT youths who have been expelled from their homes are being placed in the care of gay and lesbian couples.

Suicide Risk

Victimization by bullying from peers, teacher and parental rejection, an unhappy home life, substance abuse, affiliation with a fundamentalist religious organization, and sexual identity conflicts are among the conditions predisposing young people to attempt or commit suicide.

According to a study published by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, gay and lesbian youths are two to three times more likely to commit suicide than other youths. About a third of all completed youth suicides are related to issues of sexual identity. Due to the disturbing nature of these findings, the results were initially suppressed by the government.

Seven times as many boys with gender identity issues as gender conforming boys attempted suicide. The comparable ratio for girls was less pronounced as about one and a half to one. Gender nonconformity is much more an issue for males than for females. Girls are also somewhat protected by the fact that they recognize their lesbianism at a later age than do boys on average. This fact probably gives them greater coping skills for dealing with any animosity they encounter.

In a Canadian study young adult men from a cross-section of the population answered questions on portable computers. Results were startling in that gay and bisexual subjects were found to have nearly fourteen times the suicide ideation of heterosexual males.

The statistics on transgendered persons and suicide are scarce. One survey showed that 32% of transgendered persons had attempted suicide. These attempts were related to young age, depression, substance use, forced sex, and other victimization.

Prevention

A harm reduction or public health approach is vital. Preventive measures need to be aimed at all school-age youth to help them with sexual identity issues. Schools can play a key role in adolescent development by providing an environment free of harassment and offering services and curriculum that reflects the life experience and sexual

orientation of students. School social workers and guidance counselors can help through program advocacy, leading after-school groups to work on sexual identity issues, and providing family counseling, and counseling for bullies as well as for their victims.

In the absence of openly gay and lesbian teacher role models which is a serious absence in itself, a community of gay and pro-gay students to provide peer support is essential. Gay/straight alliances have also been a major factor in helping teenagers create openly gay lives. There are an estimated 3,000 of these alliances worldwide.

An excellent strategy is to invite a PFLAG (Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays) panel to address issues related to growing up as gay or lesbian. (Information at <http://pflag.org>.)

Exemplary programs are underway in Massachusetts and Scandinavia. Massachusetts has led the nation in educating teachers to discuss homosexuality as well as heterosexuality in age-appropriate ways so that all students will feel included. In Norway, anti-bullying programs have been highly successful because of the active responsibility taken by bystanders which defuses the power that the bully has over a victim.

How Social Workers Help

The National Association of Social Workers (NASW) has consistently taken strong public stands on behalf of GLBT rights, including same-sex marriage and adoption rights. NASW has consistently filed amicus curiae (friend of the court) legal briefs in relevant Supreme Court cases.

Schools of social work prepare their students to enter a profession with a strong emphasis on social justice and diversity. Social workers are thus ideally prepared to deal with gender identity and sexual orientation issues in their mental health and family counseling.

The area of social work practice with the greatest relevance for youth suicide prevention is school social work. Working with school authorities, state legislators, and students, school social workers are in a position to help transform the jock culture of many of our schools into a caring culture.

An extensive survey of school social workers conducted by NASW in 2000 in conjunction with APA (the American Psychological Association), revealed the following:

- Most school social workers have counseled a gay or lesbian student for harassment by peers

- Over one-third have counseled a gay or lesbian student regarding safe sex practices
- About half agreed that administrative support for LGBT counseling was lacking
- Practically all favored staff and teacher training on sexual orientation issues.
- School social workers see advocacy for gay and lesbian youth in situations of gender harassment as a part of their professional roles.

Central to this work is to “be there” for young persons wrestling with sexual identity issues and therefore help reduce the impact of the harm that is done to them through society’s mistreatment.