

What Do I Do Now? When a Child Comes Out as Lesbian or Gay

Rev. Mark C. Johnston, Ph.D.

Rev. Mark C. Johnston, Ph.D., is a licensed psychologist and an ordained minister in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). Dr. Johnston earned his Ph.D. in Pastoral Psychology from Boston University in 1994. He has more than 25 years of experience working with gay and lesbian youth and adults and their parents in the church and in clinical settings. He has served as the Executive Director of the Open & Affirming Ministry Program for the Disciples LGBTQ+ Alliance for the past 6 years.

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A child comes out and a parent is stunned. It happens every day.

Perhaps you're reading this because it just happened to you. Perhaps you don't know what to say, don't know how to understand what's happening. Perhaps you're scared for your child's future. These are all normal reactions.

You're a loving parent and you want to do the right thing. But right now, you can't think clearly. In your surprise you may have said all the wrong things, or just a couple of wrong things, but there's room to fix that. Right now, you just need some breathing room. Read on: this is for you.

Why does this feel so wrong?

Yes, you've always been the parent who wanted to love your child no matter what. But right now, this is feeling so wrong. Perhaps you go to a church where the sermons make it clear that gay and lesbian people are living lives against the Bible. Now that it's your own child, this just isn't making sense. Or perhaps you've always thought of yourself as the progressive parent who could take anything in stride. Suddenly you're not feeling so sure you can handle this.

You love your child and God loves your child. Your child is a warm, caring person. So what's going on here?

There are a number of feelings that come upon all of us at times like this. It's not uncommon for a parent in this situation to feel several different feelings:

- **Shock:** When confronted with unexpected news, we just don't know what to say or do. Perhaps we stammer and stutter, perhaps we're speechless, perhaps we say all the wrong things. Although normal, shock is not helpful. A deep breath, thinking twice before speaking, and taking a break from the conversation can all help.
- **Denial:** When we are presented with unwelcome news, we often deny what's happening. Sometimes parents will insist that their child is only going through a phase. Some parents refuse to talk about what's happening; others may try to force rules of behavior on their children, trying to make them act straight. At an extreme, some families break off their relationships with their gay and lesbian members. Clearly, denial is not a helpful response.
- **Fight or flight:** In any anxiety provoking situation, we are tuned to fight or flee to protect ourselves from what is happening. This leads some parents to say nothing and withdraw from the relationship (flight), or to lecture and get angry (fight). A better response is to stay open to what is going on, to remain in relationship, to listen, to ask honest questions, and to search for understanding.
- **Guilt and shame:** When our social, cultural, and religious understandings of gay and lesbian people are negative, parents who learn that their child is gay often react with guilt or shame. Guilt is blaming yourself for the problem. Shame is fear of what others think. There's no need for guilt or shame. We no longer blame clinging or distant parents for causing homosexuality. These theories were debunked years ago. Today, every reputable medical, psychological,

educational, and psychiatric association agrees that homosexuality is part of the natural variation of human experience. Of course, social attitudes are another thing. Often a parent realizes that accepting and loving a gay child may cause some lost friendships. This can be a difficult struggle, but I pray that every loving parent would put their child first.

- **Crisis of faith:** For many of us, church has taught us that homosexuality is evil, an abomination, and disgusting. We know our children are not evil, abominable, and certainly not disgusting. This dilemma brings many a parent to a place of questioning their church or perhaps even their faith. This can be an especially difficult dilemma for parents who are deeply devoted to their church and their faith. In the Bible, God is often understood as a loving parent, Father of us all. I believe that God expects us to love our children first and ask questions later.

But what about the future?

Like most parents, you have an image of what the future holds in store for your child. Perhaps that future looks a lot like the life you live: a stable job in a nice quiet neighborhood that's great for raising kids; or an interesting career in a vibrant city where you can introduce your kids to much that the world has to offer. Perhaps the future you dream of for your kids is different from your life: a better career, a more exciting life, or more education. But when your child came out to you, these images crumbled.

When we lose our image of the future, it can very much feel like everything is lost. Remember the first time years ago when you had a romantic relationship break apart? It felt like a part of you had died. Have you ever

been laid off a job? It felt like your world had shattered. These are natural feelings. We depend on our images of the future to guide our present and to give us a sense of stability and meaning.

So it's okay to feel this way. It's also true that you'll move past these feelings. Remember that romantic relationship that broke up? Eventually, you moved on, learned from your past, found a more compatible partner, and built up a new life. And that job lost? I hope you've found a new job, took the opportunity to find something you enjoyed more, trained for a better position, and perhaps you now look back on that lost job as a blessing.

But it's also true, and time will show this to you, that only a small part of your image of the future has changed. Your daughter or son didn't change overnight into a completely different person. She still has the same dreams for the future, he still has the same interests he's always had: hobbies, sports, career plans and family plans, your son or daughter still has these interests and dreams. The only piece of the picture that has changed is the gender of the person whom you imagine they will one day build a life with. Today that seems huge; tomorrow that will seem unimportant.

There is also something else to remember if we're to be fully honest with ourselves: nothing has been lost and much has been gained. What do I mean by this?

Nothing has been lost: our dreams don't exist anywhere except in our imagination. They never existed in reality. While it's quite painful to lose a dream, it's also true that a dream is not a thing that ever existed. What's actually happened is you have become more aware of the world as it is. And here's what I mean by much has been gained: your son or daughter has chosen to include you in her or his life. Your child has decided that being in close loving relationship with you is important, important enough to risk the feelings that both of you are having right

now, for a new future of trust, honesty, and even joy.

Is my child going to be happy?

Of course you want your child to be happy. All loving parents want their children to be happy. And I have to give you an honest answer: I don't know if your child is going to be happy. But I'll also give you another honest answer: your daughter's or son's happiness will have nothing to do with being gay or lesbian.

What will have an effect on your child's happiness? I'm willing to guess that your child will be happiest when surrounded by a loving, supportive family. I make that guess because I've met many lesbian and gay folk who were rejected by their families and have to put in a lot of extra work to build full, happy lives without that love and support.

Many lesbian and gay people never come out to their family. These men and women often move thousands of miles away from their childhood home, become strangers to their parents and siblings and the rest of their family, and they build new lives. Many of them have built good lives, solid relationships, successful careers, but how sad that they can't share these things with their family? Your child has decided not to become one of these people.

I am confident that your child came out to you because he or she wants you in his or her life. I hold this confidence because I have met many of these gay men and women also. They share their lives, their partners and their children with parents, siblings, grandparents, aunts, uncles, nephews, and nieces. These extended families find joy in the diversity of their lives.

What does Jesus say about gay and lesbian people?

Nothing.

There's your answer. There's nothing in the gospels about gay and lesbian people, their relationships, or even gay and lesbian sex.

But perhaps we can read between the lines and ask what Jesus might have said?

When asked the greatest commandment, Jesus responded with the command to love God and neighbor. At the very least, Jesus makes it clear that we are not to hate our neighbor. He illustrated the answer with the parable of the Good Samaritan, teaching us that it is our job to love even the most reviled people in our society.

Another story that I think sheds some light on what Jesus might have to say about lesbian and gay people today is the story of the woman caught in adultery. When she was brought before him and the crowd reminded Jesus that the law said she must be stoned, what was his response? "Let him who is without sin cast the first stone."

Today, gay and lesbian people are called sinners by many of our churches. While we don't stone people to death anymore, many in our society try to deny gay people basic rights, shun them, and even bully and harass them. But what was Jesus' attitude in general towards people that society doesn't like?

Jesus was accused by the Pharisees, the self righteous of his day, of spending time with the adulterers and tax collectors, eating in their homes and being their friend. I believe that today Jesus would be hanging out with the gay people, not the self righteous.

The fact that there's nothing in the gospels concerning gay and lesbian people should give us pause. These are the most important books in the New Testament, recording the life and words of Jesus, yet not one of the gospel writers thought it was important to include anything about gay people. In contrast, the

gospels do spend a lot of time warning us not to judge others. Jesus teaches us by example how to love our neighbor and how to love the outcast. We should remember that condemning people wasn't Jesus style.

What about all those other verses in the Bible about lesbian and gay people? Doesn't the Bible say that gay and lesbian people are going to hell?

The short answer: No. The Bible does not say your child is going to hell.

First of all, the concept of a person as gay or lesbian didn't exist in biblical times. The word 'homosexual' didn't even exist before the late 1800s. Today we understand 'homosexual' to mean a person primarily attracted to forming emotional, romantic, and sexual relationships with a person of the same gender. Before the 1800s people didn't even consider that this was possible. So any time you see a Bible verse that uses the word 'homosexual,' it must be a mistranslation, because today's concept of homosexuality didn't exist when the Bible was written.

What about traditional, Biblical family values and marriage?

Yes, many churches today teach that gay relationships are contrary to traditional Biblical marriage. But what is the Biblical norm for marriage?

First, it is clear that in Biblical times, marriage wasn't about emotional attachment and romance.

In ancient times, marriage was ownership. The family, in Biblical times, consisted of one man who owned one or more women in various forms, including marriage, concubinage, and slavery.

Yes, in biblical times women were considered property. A daughter belonged to her father

until she married, and in marriage a woman belonged to her husband.

Because this was the culture of the time, the writers of the time never thought they needed to explain it. Yet, we can see this assumption in many parts of the Bible.

Look at the 10th Commandment: "Neither shall you covet your neighbor's wife. Neither shall you desire your neighbor's house, or field, or male or female slave, or ox, or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor." (Deut 5:21 NRSV). Many translations use a comma and not a period after the word 'wife' in this verse, making the point even more clear: the ten commandments simply assume that a man's wife is just one of his many possessions.

Or have you ever wondered why it's traditional to ask a father for his daughter's hand in marriage? Or why the father gives the bride away in a traditional wedding ceremony? These traditions are based on the understanding that the daughter belongs to her father, that she is his property until he gives her away to her new husband who then becomes her new owner.

This understanding of women as property lasted a lot longer than you might think (and is still the understanding in some countries today). As late as the founding of the US, our laws often denied married women the right to control her own property. Of course a woman couldn't control property: she was property herself. This slowly changed over time, yet as late as 1981 it still took a Supreme Court decision to ensure that a married woman had the right to control her own property. Yes: 1981. It can take a while to break an old habit.

Why is all this important for understanding the Bible and relationships today?

In the past, marriage was the ownership of a woman by a man. Two women couldn't be in a marriage, because women couldn't own

anything, let alone each other. Two men couldn't be in a marriage, because a man can't be property. Notice that verse in Leviticus that is often quoted against gay people: "If a man lies with a male as with a woman..." (Lev 20:13). It says nothing about women and their behavior. Using a man as property is the crime in this verse. The people who wrote this verse weren't talking about loving gay and lesbian relationships; they couldn't, because they didn't understand that gay and lesbian people existed, and they didn't think marriage was about loving relationship. What they did believe is that relationships were about ownership, so questions about loving relationships would have made no sense to the people who wrote Leviticus.

Today we look to other values in the Bible when we want to ground our relationships in Biblical values. We base our loving relationships today on the Biblical values of love, justice, honesty, equality, and mutual care and concern. The relationships of gay and lesbian people can and do celebrate these values just as well as any other.

What do I do now?

Many parents are surprised when a child comes out to them. Your first reactions may not have been your best, but that's ok. Your daughter or son thought long and hard about coming out to you. Your child knows it will take some time for you too and is willing to be patient. Gay and lesbian people come out to their parents and family because they want to be in relationship, want to experience loving connected family. They don't do it to hurt their families, although they are very aware that the process of coming out can be painful. Here are some things that can be helpful in building up a loving relationship with your child.

Take care of yourself

First, I would suggest that you take care of yourself. Remember when you get on an

airplane and the flight attendants do their safety demonstration? What do they say about the oxygen masks every time? Put your own mask on first, then help those around you. This same principle applies here: you can't help others unless you're taking care of yourself first.

Self care here might include talking with friends or your pastor about what is happening. You may need to make an effort to find a pastor who is going to be supportive and helpful without judging. You probably have friends who have gay and lesbian family members or children. Talk with them about their experiences and what they went through. It will be helpful to know that you're not alone.

Self care may include doing some Bible study or perhaps some reading about the lives of gay and lesbian people today. I've included some resources below that have been helpful for many parents.

Self care includes being patient with yourself. It's okay not to understand everything right now. There's plenty of time to learn. It's okay if you didn't say all the right things. I know many gay and lesbian people whose parents didn't say the right things at first. Your child knows that it took time to come to understand him or herself. Your child will give you time to grow also.

Self care includes all the basics too: get some exercise, take a walk in the sunshine, eat healthy meals, get some sleep, spend time doing things you love and spend time with people you love.

Don't blame yourself

There's nothing here to blame yourself for. No credible doctor, psychologist, or psychiatrist will tell you that there's anything here that's your fault. There is research that implies that a hormone here or a gene there may have contributed to your child's sexuality, but nothing definitive. Many attempts have been made to link parenting styles to homosexuality, but not one of them

has stood the test of time. Also, it is probably true that homosexuality exists in all human cultures and always has. The evidence indicates that homosexuality is simply part of the normal variation of human existence.

Take credit for raising a loving caring child

By coming out to you, your child has said that loving you is more important than lying to you. Your son or daughter wants to be honest, live with integrity, and be a part of your loving family. That wouldn't have happened if you hadn't been there to teach your child these values.

Trying to change someone's mind isn't going to help

If you've read this far, you're probably doing your best to be accepting. However, it's understandable that you're still thinking "but isn't this a phase?" and "what can I say to make this all go away?" Even if you disagree with me that being gay or lesbian is part of the natural variation in God's creation, arguing about this with your child at this point isn't going to improve your relationship with him or her.

That doesn't mean you shouldn't express your honest feelings. Many parents wish this would go away, wish that life were different for their children. These are honest feelings that many loving parents have. Expressing them is okay. What's not going to help is to take these feelings and try to impose changes to make it all go away. It is the experience of many parents that these feelings diminish as they come to see more and more that their gay and lesbian children are happy, loving members of their family, church, and society.

How can I help my son or daughter?

Your child came out to you in order to be in an honest relationship with you. Honor this and learn to be there for your child.

Love

So simply said, so difficult that a lifetime of practice is never enough. Remember that

Jesus taught us to love one another. To love another is to ask what is best for the other separate from our own desires, needs, or even beliefs. What is needed? Being a loving parent, building family and relationship around your gay and lesbian children, connecting with them and accepting them when it's easy and when it's difficult, and sometimes simply praying that God will love them when loving them seems humanly impossible.

Put your child first

I find it amazing that I have to encourage parents to "put your child first," but I have heard too many stories from gay and lesbian people whose parents didn't. Gay teenagers have been kicked out of their homes and become homeless because their parents believed their faith and their church expected this. Parents of gay people have sent their children to camps and programs that claim to make children straight. These programs are abusive and damaging. If society, the culture around you, or even your church is encouraging you to take a stand or to make a choice that doesn't seem 100% loving, give it the love test first: are you acting in the best interest of your child? or are you protecting your place in society, your community, or your church? If you don't know the answer, have patience, pray, study, research, and talk with a variety of other people before you make a choice.

Listen

This sounds so simple and is so difficult. Listen to what your children want to tell you. Your child will open up when he or she feels safe. Providing a non-judgemental listening ear will create that safe space.

Don't lecture

Lecturing is the opposite of listening. Lecturing is telling people they're wrong and you're right. True, you may be right. They may be wrong. But lecturing won't engender listening. Listen first. Listen a lot. Then, if there are concerns that need to be expressed,

express them in a calm, caring, non-judgmental way.

Create a safe space without judgment

Expressing judgment will only drive your child back into the closet. For many this results in years if not a lifetime of broken relationship. If you don't understand, say so. If you're uncomfortable, express that. But judgmental statements about people being sick, sinful, or wrong do nothing to build relationship.

Keep confidentiality

Confidentiality is the bedrock of creating safe space. As a parent, you need to judge when to keep it and when to break it, but break it only with the certainty that you are doing the best you can to make a loving and selfless choice. As children get older, they deserve more confidentiality in their relationship with you.

Pay attention and invite conversation when needed

Invitations to talk are important. They tell your son or daughter that you're ready to learn more and to be in relationship. Sometimes this is simply being available at dinner or while driving, but invitations to talk such as asking questions in non-judgmental ways about activities, friendships, relationships and dating send the signal that you're open to learning more and being connected in relationship. It is important to communicate that you are willing to know the whole of who your son or daughter is.

Treat your gay or lesbian child normally

Did you tell your straight daughter that she can't date until she's 16? Then don't tell your gay son that he can't date until he moves out of the house. Do you talk with your straight son when he's not choosing the best of friends, but mostly let him make his own choices? Do the same with your lesbian daughter. Do you accept your straight adult son's choices in career, dating, and activities without judgment? Do the same for your adult lesbian daughter. Your gay child is normal, treat him or her that way.

Remember that issues around substance abuse, pornography, promiscuity, and sexually transmitted diseases are not gay issues

Drug abuse and alcohol, choices around sexual activity, and protecting oneself from disease are not gay and lesbian issues. All children need education on dangers in life and all parents struggle to communicate with their children on these issues. Yet it is also true that gay and lesbian people have a different relationship with some of these issues than do straight people. Yes, gay people have a higher incidence of alcohol and drug abuse than do straight people. Yes, gay men are more at risk for HIV. But don't forget that your straight children need to learn to protect themselves from HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases too. And lesbians can get pregnant. Becoming an educated parent around these issues for all your children, gay and straight, son and daughter, is important. However, a stance that being gay or lesbian is the cause of any of these issues is not going to improve the odds that your child is going to learn from you.

Find safe spaces for your child

Helping your child find safe spaces is especially important when a younger child comes out. Are you attending a church where gay people are not welcome? Out of love for your child, it's time to find a congregation that welcomes your whole family. Find out if there is a gay straight alliance at your child's school or a local organization for gay and lesbian youth. Don't force any of these on your child - different groups match well with different people - but be informed about the resources available and be willing to support your child.

Should I help my child become straight?

In a nutshell, no. Reputable medical, psychiatric and psychological associations are clear that therapy designed to change a person from gay or lesbian to straight is not only ineffective but harmful.

What should I do if I suspect my child is gay?

Perhaps you're reading this not because your child has come out, but because you suspect that your child is gay. I hope you've found much of the advice given here helpful. Perhaps your child is gay and needs to know that coming out will be safe. Perhaps your child isn't gay. Still, all children will benefit from knowing that they are loved by their parents no matter who they are. Here are some ways to provide that space.

Don't confront

Confronting a child who isn't ready to talk will only lead to denial. Your child will feel guilty for lying and you will still be wondering if you know the truth.

Create an open, supportive space

Many of the suggestions above apply here too. Attend a church where gay and lesbian people are welcome and visible. If a family member or a family friend has a same sex partner, speak about them openly and welcome them into your home warmly. If there's a TV show with a lesbian or gay character, don't make negative comments. Talk about that TV show and those characters like you would any other. When you hear negative comments about gay people or see negative portrayals of gay people in the media, name your opposite and affirming opinion in front of your child.

What should I do now?

The mere fact that you've read this far tells me that you're a concerned loving parent trying to do the best for your gay son or lesbian daughter. The fact that your child has come out to you tells me that you've done something right: instilled the values of honesty and integrity, and nurtured a relationship that your child values. So what you do now is keep on doing what you do best: loving your child and nurturing her or his future. You may need to make some new friends, learn some more about the Bible, and research the issues that your child faces that you aren't familiar with. Towards that end I've listed a few resources below. Show your son or daughter that you're doing your best to understand, love your child as best you can, and trust that God will take care of the rest.

Resources

Organizations

Secular

Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG) www.pflag.org

Church Welcoming Programs

Within most denominations there is a welcoming program working for the full inclusion and acceptance of gay and lesbian members. Here is a list of a few of the largest. For a more comprehensive list see www.welcomingresources.org/links.htm.

Baptist www.awab.org

Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)
www.disciplesallianceq.org

Episcopal www.integrityusa.org

Evangelical www.ecinc.org

Lutheran www.reconcilingworks.org

Presbyterian Church (USA) www.mlp.org

Roman Catholic www.dignityusa.org

United Church of Christ
www.openandaffirming.org

United Methodist www.rmnetwork.org
www.umaffirm.org

Books and DVDs

There are many books available that can be helpful for growing in your understanding of gay and lesbian issues. Here are just a few that can be helpful

Parenting Issues

Now That You Know: A Parents' Guide to Understanding Their Gay and Lesbian Children (Betty Fairchild, Nancy Hayward)

Always My Child: A Parent's Guide to Understanding Your Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgendered or Questioning Son or Daughter (Kevin Jennings)

Faith and Your Child

Coming Out Young and Faithful (Leanna McCall Tagert and Timothy Brown)

Bulletproof Faith: A Spiritual Survival Guide (Candace Chellew-Hodge)

The God Box (Alex Sanchez)

Bible Study, Traditional Marriage, and Family Values

What the Bible Really Says About Homosexuality (Danial A. Helminiak)

Changing Our Mind (David P. Gushee)

God and the Gay Christian: The Biblical Case in Support of Same-Sex Relationships (Matthew Vines)

A la Familia: Una Conversación Sobre Nuestras Familias, la Biblia, la Orientación Sexual Y la Identidad de Género (Miguel A. De La Torre)

Personal Faith

In the Eye of the Storm: Swept to the Center by God (Gene Robinson)

For the Bible Tells Me So (DVD/YouTube)

More Information

From the American Psychological Association

Answers to Your Questions For a Better Understanding of Sexual Orientation & Homosexuality

<http://www.apa.org/topics/sexuality/orientation.pdf>

Just the Facts about Sexual Orientation and Youth: A Primer for Principals, Educators, and School Personnel

<http://www.apa.org/pi/lgbt/resources/just-the-facts.aspx>

“In this brief monograph Mark Johnston has captured the essential elements of responding faithfully to what to some must be a difficult disclosure. A parent's response is most crucial to a child who makes his or her sexuality known. This essay will be of great value to all parents - of gay/lesbian and ‘straight’ children. I'd recommend it to all as an important guide to understanding the way we are.”

Rev. Chris Hobgood
Former General Minister and President of
the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)

“*What Do I Do Now? When a Child Comes Out as Lesbian or Gay* is a very insightful, honest and helpful resource for parents and others dealing with what is often a very painful and difficult situation. I have added it to my toolbox of resources and highly commend it to you.”

Rev. Dr. Alvin O. Jackson
Senior Pastor, Park Avenue Christian Church, New York City

“There is a place for conviction, but in Christ the place for compassion is greater still. Regardless of your convictions, in this helpful ebook Mark has provided us with a practical guide to the way of compassion. It is a welcome and useful resource.”

Rev. Dr. Douglas Skinner
Senior Minister, Northway Christian Church, Dallas, Texas

“The author is clearly a man of deep faith but also extensive clinical and pastoral experience accompanying parents who are trying to make sense of their child’s sexual orientation and respond lovingly and faithfully. His compassionate and insightful account of the wide range of reactions parents may experience in the days and months after finding out that their daughter or son is lesbian or gay should reassure parents that their responses are normal. Importantly, his very practical coaching on what is helpful and not helpful to say and do in that challenging period is both theologically and psychologically solid.”

Dr. John McDargh
Associate Professor of Psychology and Religious Development
in the Department of Theology at Boston College and director
of the Center for Psychotherapy and Spirituality of the
Massachusetts School of Professional Psychology

“Dr. Mark Johnston has done a great service in preparing this small but substantive guide for parents of GLBTQ children. I commend this to every parent, regardless of their children's sexuality, because so much of the advice is just plain great for ALL parents and because all parents live in a world where there are so many GLBTQ children, kin or not, who need to be understood and supported as they navigate a predominantly heterosexual world. I am grateful to Mark for this good and helpful guidance!”

Rev. Dr. Dick Hamm
Former General Minister and President of the Christian Church
(Disciples of Christ) and author of *Recreating the Church*