

Tips and Resources for Family and Friends of GLBT Persons

When someone close to us reveals that they are gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender we may experience a range of emotions. Similarly, when we learn that a family member has a mental illness, feelings may include concern, confusion, or a desire to provide support.

Whether a GLBT friend or family member has shared with you that they have a mental illness, or someone with a mental illness has revealed to you their sexual orientation or gender identity, there are some common strategies to being a good ally:

Be supportive

- Make sure to listen and provide support to your family member or friend. Ask questions to learn more while remaining open and non-judgmental.

Learn more

- Take the time to learn more about GLBT issues or about your loved one's mental illness. Public libraries and the Internet may provide a good starting place. You may also want to have a conversation with your family member or friend to learn more about the issues that are important to them. Demonstrating a desire to better understand their situation is a good first step to being an ally.

Offer compassion and respect

- Understand that because of the societal stigma associated both with sexual orientation (or gender identity) and mental illness, revealing such information may be difficult for your family member or friend. Even if you feel conflicted about the information they have shared, try to respect how difficult it may have been to reveal this information.

Find support for yourself

- To be a good ally, you may need to find support networks of your own. You may need to rely on others to talk through your emotions or to digest the information that was shared with you. A good source of support may be others who are experiencing the same issues as you, such as in support groups.

Listed below are additional tips for being a good ally to your gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender family member or friend:

Challenge stereotypes

- Challenge derogatory remarks or jokes made at the expense of any group, and avoid making them yourself. These remarks reinforce stereotypes and make it seem that prejudice is acceptable.

Don't expect GLBT persons to be "experts"

- Don't expect members of any group that is the target of bias (e.g. LGBT people, people with mental illness) to act as the "experts" to educate others about their group. Avoid tokenizing or patronizing people different from you.

Remember that you are human

- Allow yourself to not know everything, to make mistakes, to occasionally be insensitive. Give yourself time to learn, ask questions, and explore your own ideas and feelings. Extend the same to others. Don't present yourself as an "expert" unless you truly are one.

Prepare yourself for change and growth

- It can be exciting, painful and enlightening to explore issues related to sexual orientation, gender identity, and/or mental illness. Accept that even if it's painful, this will be a journey of learning and growth. By becoming a good ally you'll be improving society in the process.

General GLBT Web sites

Listed below are Web sites for some national GLBT organizations and the descriptions they provide of their work. Many of these Web sites have links to additional resources and information. This list is not exhaustive or comprehensive and readers are encouraged to explore the Internet for additional resources.

Bisexual Resource Center

www.biresource.org

GPAC

Gender Public Advocacy Coalition

www.gpac.org

HRC

Human Rights Campaign

www.hrc.org

NGLTF

National Gay and Lesbian Task Force

www.thetaskforce.org

PFLAG

Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays

www.pflag.org

Youth

GLSEN

The Gay, Lesbian & Straight Education Network

www.glsen.org

NYAC

National Youth Advocacy Coalition

www.nyacyouth.org**GLBT Health / Mental Health**

Association of Gay and Lesbian Psychiatrists

www.agip.org

GLBT Help Line (for all ages)

1-888-340-4528

(6pm – 11 pm EST)

GLMA

Gay and Lesbian Medical Association

www.glma.org

Hearts and Ears, Inc.

www.heartsandears.org

LGBT Suicide Prevention Hotline

1-800-850-8078

www.TheTrevorProject.org

LGBT Youth Peer Listening Line

1-800-399-7337/PEER

(5pm-11pm EST)

NAMI HelpLine

National Alliance on Mental Illness

1-800-950-NAMI (6264)

www.nami.org

National Coalition for LGBT Health

www.lgbthealth.net

Rainbow Heights Club

www.rainbowheights.org