
Teens and Homosexuality: A Critical Time for Intervention

An increasing number of teens are adopting a bisexual or gay/lesbian identity. Reaching youth before they become trapped in homosexual behavior is of increasing concern to youth pastors and other church leaders. Drug abuse, sexual activity, and suicide among our youth are at an all-time high. At least 77% will have tried alcohol or drugs, and more than 80% will have had sex by the time they finish high school. News of intentional overdoses and suicide pacts pepper the news reports that once highlighted student achievements.

A lesser-known yet equally alarming fact is the rise of teenage homosexual activity. While solid statistics are hard to come by, several experts believe that homosexuality is on the increase, especially among our youth.

This may have a lot to do with the disintegration of the family. Increases in family violence, incest, and child molestation have also added to the problem. Perhaps the growing tolerance towards homosexuality by the media and society, along with growing moral confusion created by situational ethics taught in public schools, have made the homosexual experience a viable option to explore. In addition, we dare not ignore the fact that many adolescents who think they might be gay are being encouraged by counselors and other professionals to accept that identity.

At best, teenage years are trying. These are the years of internal conflict when sexual identity is still being shaped. Sexual curiosity and experimentation are commonplace but often lead to more confusion and wrong conclusions regarding sexuality. Once teens become sexually active they are beset by even more complex struggles.

At this point most teens want someone they can talk to, someone they can trust. Quite often that's all they need for direction. Who will be their sounding board? Their parents? Hardly. Would you have talked to your folks about masturbation or erotic feelings for someone of the same sex? Will they talk to a pastor or priest? Mostly not.

Who is left? You and I. We are their teachers, youth group leaders, next-door-neighbors, and people they meet at church. We are the ones who bear the responsibility to act if the Lord brings a struggling teen into our lives. You can turn the tide in the life of a teenager by your willingness to be involved.

You don't need to be an expert on homosexuality to help someone struggling with it. Don't be intimidated by your lack of knowledge. The main requirements are a commitment to Jesus Christ, a love for teenagers, and availability. A person sensitive to the signs of homosexual struggle can lovingly intervene and help a young person work through those feelings.

How can you tell if a young person is struggling with homosexuality? The following signs are not a comprehensive list nor are they exclusive indicators of homosexual struggles. Several in combination, however, should alert us to the possibility of problems.

Relational Breakdown Between Parents and Children

Roughly 80% of individuals involved in homosexual behavior come from homes where the father was a substance abuser or addicted to some other behavior. Familial abuse (sexual, physical, and emotional) and neglect are much higher among those in the gay community than the general population.

Of most significance is a relational breakdown and a lack of bonding between the young person and the same-sex parent. This is especially true between boys and their fathers. This same dynamic is true for girls, but many, many lesbians have also had hurt inflicted by their fathers.

Equally important to external signs of unhealthy family interaction is how the young person responds to the home environment. Oftentimes none of the above symptoms are present, yet there is relational breakdown. The problem may not be real, but perceived. The child may interpret a parent's absence or actions as signs of rejection, even though that may not be the case. Whether the problem is real or imaginary, the effect is the same: the sensitive child, as a defense mechanism, detaches emotionally to guard against further hurt.

Unhealthy Cycles

This destructive foundation may birth a series of unhealthy emotional cycles that foster identification with homosexuality. While all the cycles may not appear in any one individual, many of them will. They are identifiable and progressive.

Cycle of Rejection

Rejection is at the heart of the homosexual struggle. Early childhood rejection begins a life of rejection. This causes self-hate and rejection of one's gender, producing behavior that creates further rejection, and so it goes on.

Does the young person experience a lot of rejection by others? Is there evidence of discomfort with one's gender? Does he/she spurn others, especially those of the same sex? (Girls may also be heavily critical or fearful of men, as well.)

Cycle of Shame

Shame is close to self-rejection. It does not involve what a person does, but who the person is. It is the painful feeling of being bad, seeing oneself in a diminished, devaluated way, suggesting the person is defective, inadequate, and unworthy.

Most young people who struggle with homosexual feelings have the same attitude towards homosexuality as many others do. The guilt and shame over feelings they can't control or understand produces a continuous self-loathing. Do you know a teenager who constantly feels he/she is an awful person?

Cycle of Self-Pity

While all of us feel sorry for ourselves from time to time, many homosexuals are locked into a habitual and chronic self-pity cycle. Does the young person appear to have a "woe is me" attitude much of the time? Do they tend to draw negative attention to themselves?

Cycle of Fear

In their teenage years, many individuals who eventually enter homosexuality seem bound by abnormal levels of fear. Does the young person appear to be afraid of everything, meeting new people, going to social events, or doing new things? Does he or she fear failure, success, and what others think? Is the world in general a fearful place?

Cycle of Envy

Admiration towards certain types of people soon turns to envy for teens contending with homosexual feelings. They are envious towards certain characteristics others of the same sex have that they don't.

The desire to possess these traits is a strong motivating force behind homosexual attractions. They feel that finding completion in another who possesses such traits will make them whole and acceptable. Do they envy or are they attracted to certain types of people with specific physical or personality traits?

Isolation

Many adult homosexuals describe themselves as "outsiders looking in." This is because they feel different from other people. They also don't fit society's mold for masculinity or femininity. This difference is often reinforced in teenagers by the way their peers relate to them.

The result is isolation. Is your teenager a loner? Does he/she fit in well at youth events? Is he/she the brunt of jokes and name-calling such as "fag," "queer," or "dyke"?

Obsession with A "Special Friend"

An emotionally dependent relationship, whether it leads to sex or not, is unhealthy. Of all the signs, obsession with a "special friend" is probably the best indicator. While appearing among heterosexuals too, it is most common in homosexual relationships.

During the elementary and junior high years, same-sex relationships emulating dependency are normal, but these exclusive attachments should be tapering off during the first few years of high school.

Does he/she seem to talk about a special same-sex friend all the time and not want to go places without that friend? Do they show inappropriate affection that makes others feel uncomfortable? Is the teen moody or depressed when the friend is not around or when the friend develops other relationships? Is he/she possessive of the friend's time and attention, wanting to be like them (in dress, mannerisms, etc.)?

A Critical, Bitter Attitude

Unresolved bitterness can lie at the bottom of homosexuality. Bitterness towards those who have caused hurt leads to a critical attitude of self and others, often setting up a person for failure. Is your teenager hard on himself or herself when expectations aren't reached? Is he/she overly critical towards others who are smarter, better looking, or who have what they desire?

Open Rebellion

Following a critical attitude often comes open rebellion. This rebellion can take many forms. Are they throwing off family values? Has their view of God changed? Do they challenge traditional interpretations of Scripture, especially those dealing with homosexuality? Is there a change of frequency of church attendance or at youth functions? Are they secretive about their friends? Has their appearance changed?

Helping a Teen Who Struggles with Homosexual Feelings

Once we realize a particular teenager may be struggling with sexual identity, there are a few things we can do. Be sure you deal with issues in your own life and examine your motives first. Is your relationship with Christ firm? What is your attitude towards homosexuals? Are there any areas of your own life that are inconsistent with God's will (especially your sexuality)?

You don't need to be a professional to help. Consider these practical guidelines:

Don't Jump to Conclusions. Some people have occasional homosexual feelings. Others have engaged in homosexual sex out of curiosity or for the thrill of the forbidden. These people may question their sexual orientation, but they are not homosexual. Avoid labeling them. If there was someone to talk to them and reassure them of their sexuality, they might be able to deal with the situation.

Don't Overreact. Expect unexpected "revelations." If a relationship of trust is built, the young person may want to share everything with you. This may come at an unexpected time and he/she will probably be overly sensitive to any sign of condemnation or rejection. Any overreaction could cause further alienation.

Communicate acceptance. Don't be afraid to affirm them with touching. You don't need to fear that you are condoning the behavior by your acceptance of them as a person.

Don't Pass Off Their Feelings as a Phase. The failure to take seriously the feelings of young people is to make light of an agonizing struggle. These feelings will not merely go away or be outgrown. Listen and empathize and pray.

Don't Reject Them. They will probably expect you to reject them once you know the truth. By unconditional love and acceptance, you can help break the rejection cycle. Don't panic if they express sexual feelings for you. Sex and intimacy can be intertwined in their thinking. If they fall, they need someone to pick up the pieces and get them back on track.

Don't be Afraid to Demonstrate Love. The love of Jesus must be activated in verbal communication that is consistent with actions of acceptance, concern, and availability. Don't be afraid to touch your teenager with an affirming hug or a securing arm around the shoulders. Touching is not sexual, but loving.

Don't Allow Them to be Overly Dependent on You. Jesus Christ is the answer, not you. Only God can bring about any necessary changes. You are God's instrument and a fallible one at that. Be willing to admit your limitations. Lead your young friend into a deeper walk with Jesus and a growing dependency upon Him.

Do be a Friend. Friends are the most needed resource, but the least in supply. Establish a relationship of trust. Don't violate shared confidences. Provide a safe place where he/she can share negative feelings without criticism or reprimand.

Do Lead Them to Jesus Christ. You are not presenting a moral code or merely the promise of heterosexuality. You are offering Jesus Christ. God is interested in redeeming the whole person, not just their sexuality. Point them away from their sexual sin and help them to see Jesus as the answer to all their sins. Out of a genuine relationship with Christ will come the desire and ability by the Holy Spirit to do His will, even in sexuality.

Do See a Whole Person, Not a "Homosexual." Avoid making homosexuality the entire focus of your conversation. Help your teen see himself or herself through God's eyes, as a whole person, not as a sexual being only.

Like many other sins, the act of homosexual sex has been used as a way to seek love and affirmation. Yet that love and acceptance can only come through Jesus Christ. Also, do not label the teen a homosexual, and thus validate a sinful identity.

Do Care Enough to Confront. Love enough to be honest. Don't back down on God's standard. Don't be afraid of loving confrontation that hates the sin, but loves the sinner. Avoid the temptation to cut the teenager off if he/she doesn't measure up to expectations.

Do Share from Your Life. You may not be able to relate to homosexual feelings, but you have experienced rejection, loneliness, hurt, and lust.

As you share personal struggles in these areas and how to deal with them, you help put the young person's problems in perspective and give hope for overcoming them.

Do be Patient. Homosexual feelings are not going to change overnight. The change will come with time, healing, and com-compassionate support of friends. Resist the tendency to judge the teenager's progress, your own ability as a helper, or God's power to bring change in His own way and time. Don't become discouraged, but pray for them continually.

Lead Them to Resources that will Help. Don't advise the teen to go for counseling unless you know the prospective pastor's or counselor's stand on homosexuality and the type of counseling they will give. Tell them about Exodus International. They have support groups and counseling services that will be helpful. Even if the teenager gets into counseling, stick with them. They will still need your friendship and support.

Bud Searcy is the founder and former director of New Creation Ministries in Fresno, Calif. He has been married since 1979 and has two sons.

Copyright © 1991 Bud Searcy. All rights reserved