



## Working With Families of Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender Youth



### Explore with clients the impact of disclosure to their families.

While disclosure of homosexual orientation has been found to be beneficial for psychological well-being, most family members initially react negatively to such a disclosure. Youth may face abuse and expulsion from their home when they reveal a homosexual orientation. Fully explore with your client the possible repercussions — both positive and negative — of coming out to family members. Some adolescents may find it more beneficial to their survival to wait until they are fully self-sufficient before risking the dissolution of parental support.



### Help prepare youth for their family's reaction.

Many youth expect their parents to automatically accept the child's homosexual orientation. Help the youth to understand that most parents will initially react with denial, anger, sadness, or a similar grief reaction. Just as the youth may have taken a long time to come to terms with his or her sexual orientation, families will also need to undergo a process leading to acceptance. Over time, however, most parents do in fact accept their child. Youth who cannot be patient while their parents undergo this process may be better off waiting before they come out to their parents.



### Provide support and validation to family members' feelings.

Family members will experience normal feelings of grief in the loss of their child's previously assumed heterosexual orientation. Parents may feel as though they have lost the child they knew. Mourning of this lost child — or hoped-for role of the child — should be encouraged, with the goal of substituting a new, reality-based role. However, family members should be assisted in being as supportive of their child as possible. Many family relationships have been irreparably damaged by parents' angry accusations or outbursts against their child — outbursts that they later regret. Help parents deal with their anger in a way that does not harm their relationship with their child.



### Provide accurate information and education.

Family members benefit immediately from information and education that presents a realistic, less frightening and more encouraging picture of the quality of life gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender people can expect. Let parents know that gay people — especially when they have the

#### **SMYAL**

A Safe Place to Be Who You Are

410 7th Street, SE  
Washington, DC 20003-2707

202-546-5940 Tel  
202-544-1306 Fax  
202-546-7796 TTY  
[www.smyal.org](http://www.smyal.org)



## **Working With Families of Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender Youth (Continued)**

support of their families — lead healthy, productive, normal lives. They have long-term relationships and many have families of their own. Parents can also be helped by explaining that they are not the “cause” of their child’s homosexual orientation.



### **Family members need support in going through their own “coming out” process.**

As with the gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender person, families will also go through a two-fold process of “coming out” — first to themselves, by learning to accept the sexual orientation of their family member, and then deciding who they will tell about it. They need support in working through their feelings of confusion and shame to reach the point of acceptance.

### **For more information:**

“Self-Labeling and Disclosure Among Youths,” in Lesbians and Gays in Couples and Families: A Handbook for Therapists. Joan Laird and Robert J. Green, Eds., 1996.

Coming Out to Parents: A Two Way Survival Guide for Lesbians and Gay Men and Their Parents, Mary Borhek, 1983.

Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (P-FLAG)  
1101 14th Street, NW / Suite 1030  
Washington, DC 20005  
202/ 638-4200  
<http://www.pflag.org>

### **SMYAL**

**A Safe Place to Be Who You Are**

**410 7th Street, SE  
Washington, DC 20003-2707**

**202-546-5940 Tel  
202-544-1306 Fax  
202-546-7796 TTY  
[www.smyal.org](http://www.smyal.org)**