

5 Supporting homosexual, bisexual and transexual (LGBT) adolescents and combating homophobic bullying

Introduction

First of all

LGBT teens may seek counselling for a variety of reasons. Sometimes their concerns have to do with their sexual orientation, other times they do not. Here some typical questions: “Am I gay?”, “I am also attracted to women, am I bisexual?”, “Whom can I tell?”, “How can I deal with this situation?”.

Moreover, teens often act out their distress, for instance, by dropping out of school, isolating themselves, using drugs, etc. It is hard to reach those teens who do not seek help from youth social services agencies. This is why schools are a key site for reaching a large number of teens and addressing these issues. Indeed, it is the place where teenagers can be educated to respect others and where LGBT teens and those who are not yet sure of their sexual identity can be reassured.

However, schools are important yet complex settings. As is well known, bullying is extremely common in schools and the victims are often those who belong to socially stigmatised groups (women, ethnic and sexual minorities, people with disabilities, etc.).



Basic information

What is homophobic bullying?

This expression designates prolonged behaviours of psychological, verbal or physical oppression of a less powerful person who is incapable of defending him/herself by a person or group that is/are self- or hetero-perceived as being more powerful.

Bullying is often downplayed because it is confused with the typical peer conflicts or arguments between teenagers.

However, bullying has particular features. The table below summarises the differences between bullying and peer conflict.

What is bullying?	What is peer conflict?
repeated and frequent events, prolonged over time	an occasional event
both the bully and the victim perceive power imbalance, which is often confirmed by the surrounding environment	the people involved perceive themselves as being peers and, everyone can explain their reasons
the bully feels no empathy or compassion	it is possible to put oneself in the other's shoes and, hence, mediate, thus reaching an agreement
the bully wants to harm intentionally	any party can put an end to the argument. No one wants to harm anyone intentionally
the targeted person is always the same	the conflicting parties involved might change

Please note: the most characteristic feature of bullying is that the bullies blame their violent behaviour on their victim, it's not about retaliation (I insulted him because he pushed me), victims are bullied for who they are (I insulted him/her because he/she is black/gay/a geek/poor/etc.).

Therefore, homophobic bullying is an oppressive behaviour motivated by the victim's sexual orientation (gay, lesbian, transexual, etc.).

We must bear in mind that homophobia also includes the comments against LGBT persons commonly used in everyday situations.

Those comments are not only detrimental to LGBT persons, as they are often used to sanction a wider range of behaviours. Indeed, those who do not comply with stereotypes or gender expectations also suffer from this sort of abuse: sensitive or shy boys, expansive or sporty girls, all those who do not fit into the rigid definitions of "male" or "female" and are therefore perceived to be homosexual and verbally abused for this reason. Also people who have homosexual relatives might be oppressed or insulted and may suffer because of that.

There are many different institutional difficulties which may be encountered when proposing specific counselling for gays and lesbians. Teachers who raise this issue may face resistance from both parents and the school administration.

Usually, in order to overcome these obstacles, you just need to incorporate this topic into the wider issue of the prevention of bullying, which has a larger target, concerns many of the social groups that exist within the school community and alarms adults.

Teens constantly express their curiosity about sexuality and adults convey the values that they hold regarding sexuality by talking or not talking about it, as well as through implicit and explicit behaviours. Remaining silent will make the victims of homophobic bullying feel even more isolated. Conversely, the casual use of common words that are, in fact, insulting, such as "queer" or "faggot", etc., strengthens the negative image of homosexuality, so that being compared to a homosexual becomes insulting per se.

Addressing the topic of homosexuality and heterosexuality in a professional way in both schools and health services is not the same as "promoting" it. We must keep in mind that the issue of sexual orientation concerns many teens. Assuming that 5 – 10 % of the total population has a homosexual orientation and that the percentage of same-sex behaviour is even higher, teachers are bound to have at least one LGBT boy/girl in their class.



What does this mean for me?

- There is the need to identify, analyse and combat all forms of bullying inside and outside schools.
- The acceptance of ethnic and sexual orientation minorities and their lifestyles could be promoted through the official documents of the institution (declaration of intent, circular letters, etc.), as well as in work practices.
- Offering a variety of services (prevention, actions, training and education) allows better coverage of the target population.
- Teachers and psycho/social/healthcare professionals can start a reflection in their own institutions on how to cater to, through a targeted approach, the needs of LGBT teens who belong to ethnic minorities.
- Teachers and psycho/social/healthcare professionals may create a network with other professional institutions in order to gain access to the specific knowledge and experience of ethnic and/or sexual minority experts.
- It would be useful to cooperate with local self-help and support groups: sexual minorities need these services especially because they need positive role models.
- It is necessary to pay attention to quality standards (i.e. for a structure offering specific counselling to gays, lesbians, bisexuals and transexuals: mission, type of internal communication, cooperation with other professional health care services, etc.).

Education

(Teachers)

Bear in mind

Homophobia is a form of discrimination that is as serious and devastating as racism, anti-Semitism and hate, yet it is far more tolerated. Abstaining from intervening means legitimating it. If you happened to hear or read on the walls of the classroom the expression “dirty nigger” or “death to Jews”, would you remain silent?

Teachers and youth workers should reflect on the following points:

- What is your personal level of *understanding* of homosexuality and homosexual lifestyles?
- What is your own level of commitment to the issue (try to assess it realistically: How much do you want to deal with this topic? When and where can you speak your mind on this topic? Etc.)
- What is the general level of *acceptance* of homosexuality and homosexual lifestyles within the institution you work for (the attitude of the school administration, of your colleagues, of financiers, of the Board, etc.)
- What is the general level of *acceptance* of homosexuality among parents (and also in the Boards that represent them, etc.)
- What is the *general situation* of LGBT students in your school or youth group? How is their interaction with their peers? Are they bullied?
- Since *bullying* often takes place outside of classrooms or schools, is it possible to enhance the skills of non-teaching staff (secretaries, janitors or security personnel, managers of the café outside the school, etc.) to prevent or combat homophobic bullying and discrimination?
- *Homophobia* does not just affect lesbians, gays, bisexuals or transgender persons, it affects everyone. Anyone of your students, colleagues or friends could have a LGBT relative or friend and could be hurt by homophobic remarks.
- *Silence* on LGBT issues or the *discomfort* with which adults deal with them increases the vulnerability of LGBT teens to abuse and isolation. This could initiate the following vicious circle: the LGBT teens who are bullied, because they are aware that they live in an indifferent or hostile environment, are reluctant to report bullying and don't report it to the school personnel, they isolate themselves and thus are more easily targeted by bullies.
- Tackling bullying and putting an end to bullying episodes and homo-/trans-phobic marginalisation improves quality of life, not only for the minorities involved, but for the class or context as a whole, in that it helps increasing awareness and open-mindedness in all directly and indirectly involved people.

Education - FAQs (Frequently Asked Questions)

Please also refer to the FAQs for the psycho/social/healthcare professionals

Is providing support to LGBT teens included in my duties as a teacher ?

Yes it is. We must bear in mind that teachers are key to the development of young people. In addition to providing support, you may be required to intervene in certain circumstances. For instance, a teenager may suffer from homophobic violence or discrimination in class, or the school performance of a student might drop suddenly and that might depend on the fact that he/she is having problems with his/her family or schoolmates because of his/her homosexuality.

Isn't there a conflict between my role as a teacher who has to grade students on the one hand and as a person who provides students with help and support on the other?

These two roles are perfectly reconcilable. First of all, it is important to distinguish these two roles and make this distinction clear to the student you are dealing with. You can say, for instance, that his/her grades, participation or attitude in class are do not meet minimum standards set by the school, and that it is not possible for you to compromise on such questions. On the other hand, you can offer the teen the opportunity to talk openly about a problem so that you can then work together to find the best possible solution, and specify that his/her grades will not be affected in any way.

As a teacher, I don't feel comfortable talking about LGBT issues. I'm afraid I will lose my credibility with the majority of my students.

Try to assess your own personal level of comprehension of homosexuality. It is possible to communicate a point of view clearly and commandingly without losing credibility when we feel confident and unambiguous about the topic. Of course, some teens can start laughing and making offensive remarks, but this topic often fuels students' curiosity and desire to learn (*also refer to the "Bear in mind" section for the education sector*).

How do I create a trusting setting where LGBT teens are encouraged to talk openly with me?

Start by showing that you are frank and unbiased. Then, make sure that you tell the student that everything he/she will talk about will be treated in strict confidence and that you will not tell anyone, including his/her parents, unless express authorisation is granted by him/her. It can be helpful to remind the student that your confidential talk won't have any effect on his grades. Also make sure to choose a place where you can have a private conversation.

Can I talk to my colleagues or to my boss about a confidential talk I had with a specific student?

No. You are bound to professional discretion and it would be a breach of confidentiality. If you need to consult with others, you may discuss the case anonymously by speaking in general terms, in such a way that the student cannot be identified.



Education - Tools

Stereotypes

Aim: to show participants that stereotypes are characterized by ethnocentrism and that we all tend to attribute positive traits to our own group and negative traits to others.

Method: take a big piece of cardboard and draw a human shape on it. Then ask participants to complete the following sentences written inside the drawing: “Moroccans (Italians, the Dutch) are said to be...”. Then start a group discussion. To what extent do these statements correspond to stereotypes? What is the function of a stereotype? Are stereotypes partly true?

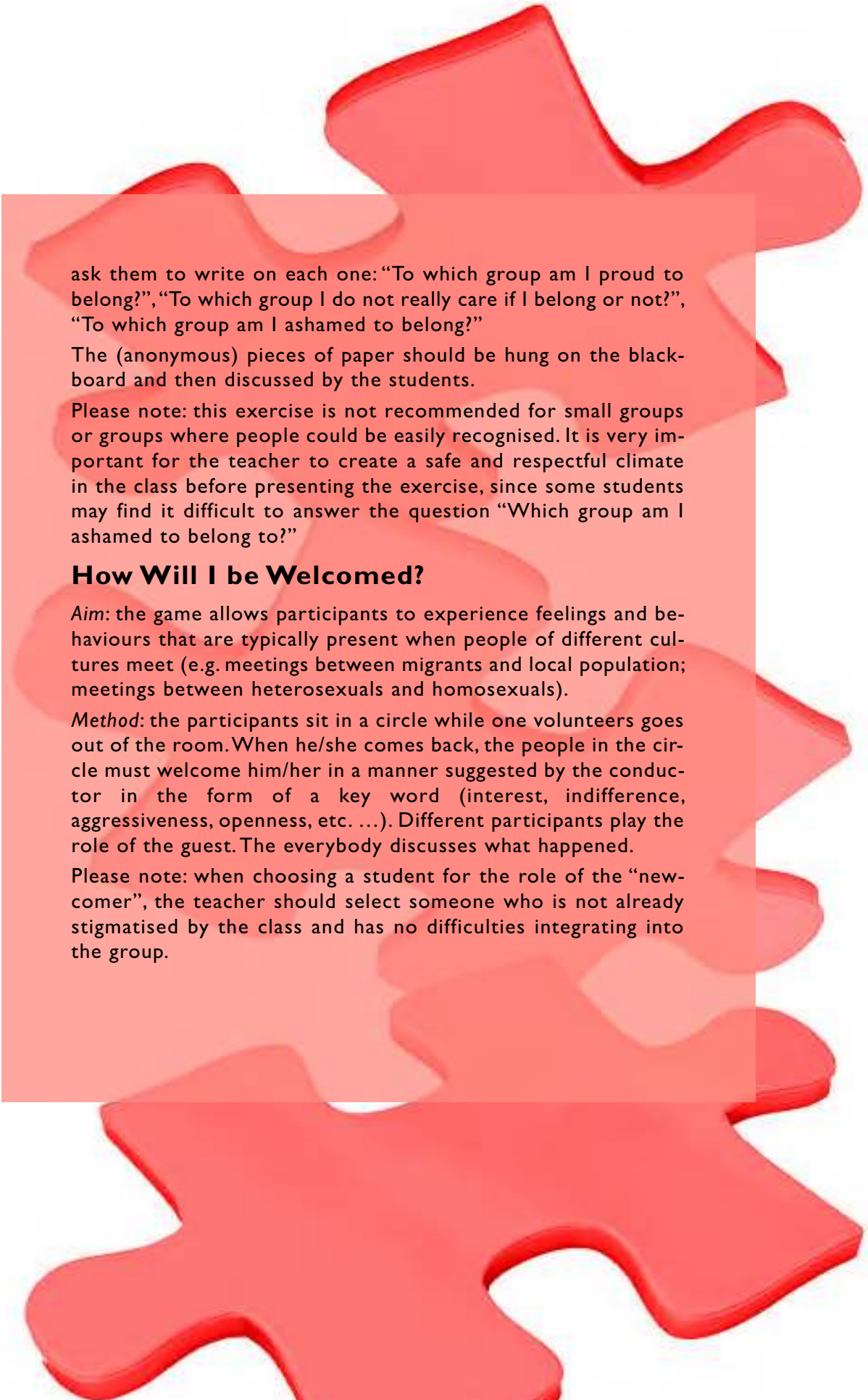
The discussion can then go on to include stereotypes on gay, lesbian, bisexual and transexual people.

Please note: if it is not self-evident, it is better to make it clear that many stereotype-based statements or comments can be offensive. If there is only one person representing a particular ethnic group in the class – for instance, only one person from Morocco – it would be preferable avoiding using Moroccans as one of the examples.

Belonging to a Group

Aim: to prove that we all belong to multiple groups, some of which may be stigmatised. What does it mean, in emotional terms, to belong to a stigmatised group?

Method: ask students to think about all the different groups they belong to (e.g. men, Turks, football players, Boy and Girl Scouts, vegetarians, etc.) Give each student three pieces of paper and



ask them to write on each one: “To which group am I proud to belong?”, “To which group I do not really care if I belong or not?”, “To which group am I ashamed to belong?”

The (anonymous) pieces of paper should be hung on the blackboard and then discussed by the students.

Please note: this exercise is not recommended for small groups or groups where people could be easily recognised. It is very important for the teacher to create a safe and respectful climate in the class before presenting the exercise, since some students may find it difficult to answer the question “Which group am I ashamed to belong to?”

How Will I be Welcomed?

Aim: the game allows participants to experience feelings and behaviours that are typically present when people of different cultures meet (e.g. meetings between migrants and local population; meetings between heterosexuals and homosexuals).

Method: the participants sit in a circle while one volunteers goes out of the room. When he/she comes back, the people in the circle must welcome him/her in a manner suggested by the conductor in the form of a key word (interest, indifference, aggressiveness, openness, etc. ...). Different participants play the role of the guest. The everybody discusses what happened.

Please note: when choosing a student for the role of the “new-comer”, the teacher should select someone who is not already stigmatised by the class and has no difficulties integrating into the group.

A STORY...



*“Oh, would you please be so kind as to clean my bedside locker as well.”
Eileen turns around. “I am not the cleaning lady. One day I’ll be a doctor.”
“Then please call Dr. Mayer. I don’t want to be cured by a nigger.”*

*Without a word Eileen puts the enema on the night table and leaves the patient’s room.
“Hello Eileen”, says a beaming Kristin. “Hey, how was your day?”
“Great! My mother thinks I’m not capable of looking after people and patients mistake me for the cleaning. And how are you?”
Kristin reels back, frightened. Her heart beats wildly. Just don’t say anything wrong again, she thinks.
“I’m so happy to see you,” she gives a faint a smile.
“I didn’t make the world,” growls Eileen. “So please don’t blame me.”
“I didn’t mean it that way.” Kristin just wishes she could run away. Why is it always so difficult with Eileen? Don’t they love each other anymore?
“Come on, I cooked something good today. Could you set the table?”
Eileen takes Kristin by the arm and kisses her slowly and tenderly. “Better now?” she asks softly.
So everything is okay, anyhow. Kristin sighs, relieved.
“Can you please take the fish knives? And the crystal wineglasses. The napkins don’t match the plates at all. Don’t you see?”
“Hey, it doesn’t matter” Kristin throws an angry look at Eileen. “I prefer to eat like this!”
“A nice-looking table is important for a good meal, Kristin. I don’t enjoy the food if everything is just thrown on the table.”
“It’s not just thrown there. It’s just my style, not yours.”
“Style is not the right word”, Eileen mutters. “You don’t mean to tell me that this is style?! And do you always have to eat with your elbows on the table?” Eileen is irritated and she changes the glasses and the napkins.
“This is how it’s done in the suburbs”, answers Kristin in a choking voice. She thinks about the smiling faces in her home, where wine was served in water glasses and lemonade in wine-glasses. Or vice versa. It didn’t matter.
“Why don’t you tell your parents that you are a lesbian?” Eileen draws back a bit, away from Kristin, who immediately pulls the table cloth to cover up to the tip of her nose.
“I’m not ready. My parents wouldn’t understand it. I for one haven’t completely understood it yet.”
“But are you sure that you love me?”
“Yes Eileen, I am quite sure. But that doesn’t mean the that entire world has to know. Do I have to be labelled like that?”
“It’s not a label, it’s an identity. Just like my being black. You carry it with you all your life.”
“As me coming from a lower social class?” asks Kristin.
“Why do you always ramble on and on with this idiotic lower classes discussion? You’re not getting insulted because of that, are you?”
“No, but everyone hints that I should be ashamed of myself because at home we don’t listen to classical music, I don’t wear brand-name clothes, and because I don’t understand three-quarters of the foreign words that the teacher uses. And because I’ve never been to the opera, or to the theatre, or to the States during summer holidays. But I’m not ashamed of my father’s job as a factory worker. I love my family.”
“So what?”
“If I had this kind of reaction when patients take you for the cleaning lady, or when my classmates ask you where you come from, or where you grew up, then probably you would leave me right away.”
“You can’t compare the two things. Completely wrong. Hey, I just need to walk down the street*

and people yell “nigger” at me. You can’t even imagine how it is and how one feels insecure, all the time and everywhere. Except for Ghana, that’s why I want to go there. You don’t even dare tell your parents that you live with someone like me.”

“It’s not true, Eileen. It’s not because you are black. I can’t make them understand that I love a girl. And I love you, I really do.”

“Really? That’s what counts most of all for me, Kristin. Because I too love you very much.”

“So, everything is all right, isn’t it?”

“Kristin, you have of been daydreaming a bit too much lately, in my opinion”. Mrs. Metz glares sternly over her glasses. “Feeling attracted to girls is normal at your age. One needs to experiment. You’ll see, the right boy will come along after all. We all go through this phase. But school performance must not be affected by that?”

“Sometimes I feel so inferior to Eileen” Kristin dares to take a glance at the face of the advisor.

“Do you think your feeling can have something to do with the fact that you are a few years younger than Eileen? You are only sixteen, at that age it’s often difficult to be a lesbian. Eileen is a few years older than you.”

“We often argue about silly things”, says Eileen. “Ridiculous things such as the colour of the napkins.”

“Perhaps neither one of you has the courage to think about your feelings for other girls yet, and you project your fear into these stupid little things?”

“But I do know that I love Eileen”, protests Kristin. “It’s just the rest that’s so difficult.”

“What do you mean when you say “the rest”, Kristin?”

“Well, for one thing, Eileen is obsessed by her skin colour. And then she thinks I don’t understand her and that I’m not supportive enough.”

“And what does that have to do with the colour of the napkins?”

“Maybe Eileen gets mad with me so much because I have not told anyone at home that we’re together yet.”

“Because you don’t want them to know that you’re dating a nigger.” Snaps Eileen angrily.

“This is complete bullshit, Eileen” yells Kristin. “See? Here we go again!”

“You are two very normal girls, just like the others. The fact that you are lesbians, or in your case black, doesn’t change anything. But the world around you says that your feelings are wrong, because they should be directed towards boys. This judgement by the others makes it difficult for you to have a harmonious relationship.”

“I’m not quite sure” wonders Kristin.

“I couldn’t care less about the people around me” yells Eileen. “The only thing I care about is if Kristin thinks about me.”

“Okay.” The counsellor looks at Kristin. “What do you feel, Kristin?”

“I love Eileen and I think she’s too cold towards me and I often feel inferior to her.”

“And you Eileen, what do you feel?”

“The same thing. And sometimes I think that Kristin doesn’t understand anything about my problems at work, or anywhere else.”

“And where do these fears come from, for both of you?”

“I don’t know”, says Eileen. “That’s why we’re here, isn’t it?”

“Our time for today is up, let’s stop here. If you want, you can come back and we will try to find out together the reasons .. this situation.”

“I don’t think she’s understood us.” Kristin kicks annoyed an empty Coke tin.

“She kept on insisting on something that has nothing to do with us”, says Eileen.

“I don’t know if she believes us when we tell her we don’t have any problem with being lesbian.”

“Yes” smiles Kristin, “Like everybody else.”



Counselling

(Psycho/social/healthcare professionals)

Bear in mind

When counselling LGBT teens, some specific aspects are to be taken into account:

- The teen's psycho-sexual history: family members opinions on homosexuality, bisexuality and transexuality, messages received by the teen;
- How the teen sees him/herself in terms of his/her sexual orientation: level of acceptance of his/her homosexual or bisexual feelings; the story of the his/her coming out; the LGBT social network, his/her lifestyle, anti-gay/lesbian/transgender violence and discrimination experiences as a victim or perpetrator (see *gay-bashing in the Glossary – Appendix 1 of the Handbook*).

It is necessary to think about these aspects in terms of your own personal history, whether you are homosexual, bisexual or transexual.

In fact, if you are gay, lesbian, bisexual or transexual you should think about the effect that knowing this may have for the person you are counselling. Many gays and lesbians need role models and, as a counsellor, for instance, you can be very important in this respect, in addition to being a significant person. Therefore, the most important thing is how you perceive your own sexuality: what has your personal development been like? What about your sexual orientation could be helpful for that individual to know? Remember that he/she should not completely identify with you. Every person has to develop his/her own personal lifestyle and every gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transexual person has to design his/her own self-acceptance process.

Counselling - FAQs (Frequently Asked Questions)

Please also refer to the FAQs for the education sector.

How much should I involve the teen's family in the counselling process?

It depends very much on the importance of the family in that person's life and the level of acceptance or rejection of homosexuality, bisexuality, transexuality within the family. Ask that to the teen and also ask if he/she is willing to do involve his/her family. Family is an important part of the social environment, however it could be devaluing and not supportive, i.e. a problem area and not a resource.

Do gays, lesbians, bisexuals, and transexuals need specific counselling?

It is not a rule. They certainly require skilled professionals, focus on and recognition of LGBT issues. Therefore, it is crucial to have a non-judging attitude and to create the conditions that will allow them to be open about their sexual orientation.

Does the effectiveness of the counselling depend on the sexual orientation of the counsellor?

No. However, sometimes there are people who need to feel they are in a safe and unbiased environment in order to be able to open up and, in this case, they could prefer working with a gay or lesbian counsellor; in this case, you may refer them to an LGBT association. If you are an openly gay/lesbian counsellor, you have to be aware that the person you are counselling might take you as a role model. This is usually beneficial for his/her life, however you should be aware of over-identification issues on both sides.

What effects can homophobic bullying have on individuals?

They can vary, be less or more pronounced, and may include the following signals:

- loss of self-confidence, self-belief and self-esteem;
- distracted and/or nervous attitude, concentration difficulties;
- poor school performance;
- school refusal, skipping classes, even symptoms of school phobia;
- tendency to avoid potentially discriminating environments, such as sports teams, extracurricular groups, etc.; self-limitation, missed opportunities;
- actual psychopathological symptoms including: depression, aggressiveness, self-mutilation, agoraphobia and social anxiety, panic attacks, psychosomatic disorders, eating disorders.

All teens are interested in sexuality, why specifically think about LGBT teens?

It is true, LGBT teens are curious and want to learn about their sexuality and that of others, just like their peers. However, for them it is more difficult to find reliable information and positive role models, while at the same time they are more easily exposed to negative attitudes toward homosexuality. Therefore, a competent and informed counselling on this topic is particularly useful for mitigating the sense of vulnerability to which LGBT teens are exposed.

Counselling -Tools

Who am I?

Aim: to help the individual explore his/her sexual identity analysing the meanings and emotions connected with it.

Method: ask the teen how he/she prefers to define him/herself and which meaning does he/she give to this self-definition. Help the teen become aware of his/her sexual identity self-acceptance level: does he/she like him/herself as a gay/lesbian/bisexual/ transexual? Does he/she wish to make any changes? Did his/her perception of his/her own personal identity change from the past? Is there something that worries him/her? How does he/she think others see him/her? How would he/she wish to be seen?

Please note: one should not take the sexual identity of individuals for granted. Exploring these aspects requires a solid “therapeutic alliance” and long-term counselling.

Gay-Bashing

Aim: to support and help victims of gay-bashing process the experience.

Method: ask the teen if he/she has ever experienced physical, psychological or verbal attacks; if so, were they direct or indirect? Did the attacks involve sexual assault? When and under what circumstances did the attack take place? Who was the attacker? Let the teen express his/her emotions. What was the impact of this experience on the victim's self-image and identity? At the end, discuss the pros and cons of reporting the incident to the police.

Please note: it helps to be familiar with counselling victims of abuse and violence. If you or you together with the teen decide to report the incident to the police, verify the possible attitude of the authorities towards these allegations. In some European countries, police stations have special offices dedicated to these types of violent crimes. Moreover, take into account the gender of the officer receiving the complaint. Keep in mind that a lesbian victim will unlikely be willing to report the assault to a male police officer.

Please refer to the legal departments of LGBT associations which now have specific protocols to address homophobic bullying.

Homophobic Bullying

Aim: prevent and stop homophobic bullying in schools.

Method: in order to enhance the empathy of the teens, have them role play a homophobic bullying incident, based on a true story, where the role of the bully will be played by the homosexual teens, while the bullies play the role of the homosexual victim. In this way, they can work on “putting themselves in someone else's shoes” and have an opportunity to get first-hand experience of the motives and emotions connected to each role.

Since bullying is a group phenomenon, it is important to have participants play all characters involved: bullies, victims and spectators. Indeed, the latter are apparently harmless but by doing nothing, apart from maybe sniggering, they in fact support the group phenomenon by taking the side of the bullies through their behaviour. The anti-bullying exercises are, in fact, especially targeted to the spectators.

Please note: this exercise helps combat the prejudice on which all forms of social exclusion are based. It also helps to shift the level of communication from “value judgement” to “expression”.

Encouraging freedom of expression allows to “make room for diversity” without judging.