

7 The LGBT Community

Introduction

First of all

As gays, lesbians, bisexuals and transexuals had to face discrimination in many aspects of their lives, they have created their own groups and communities all over the world. Indeed, there are groups of all sorts and sizes. However, there are countries where the religious or political system strongly discriminates against homosexual men and women and bans LGBT organisations or tries to limit their activity. However this is much less likely to happen today thanks to the widespread access to the Internet.



Basic information

Sometimes groups dealing with LGBT-related topics are gender-specific groups, i.e. groups for gays, groups for lesbians, and groups for transexuals only. However, most groups are open to both. Here, gays, lesbians, bisexuals and transexuals can meet and find support, discuss individual experiences on their coming out to their families and friends, share ideas and fears. Other groups are engaged in political or social activity and advocate LGBT persons' rights, for instance the right to marry or have registered partnerships and anti-discrimination laws. Other groups concentrate on the education sector, e.g. they go to schools to talk with students about their coming out and what it is like to be gay, lesbian, bisexual or transexual.

Over the past several years, many groups have been set up in response to special interests, including sports associations, recreational groups, groups that publish magazines and periodicals, volunteers' associations, confessional groups, etc.

What we must realise is that these groups, with their diverse styles and interests, can offer LGBT persons an opportunity to develop their self-awareness and get to know their local LGBT community. In this way, they have the chance to overcome loneliness.

In addition, there are many LGBT bars, restaurants, clubs, etcetera, where people can enjoy a relaxed atmosphere because LGBTs make up most of the clientele, they can meet their friends or go out with their partner without feeling looked at in a cautious way by other guests or having to explain themselves. Taken together, these groups, bars, clubs, counselling centres and associations make up the LGBT community.

There are many opinions and stereotypes about this community. For instance, some parents, teachers and sometimes even young LGBTs themselves find the community "strange" or frivolous or regard it as a sort of ghetto where they might lose the contact with "normality". Conversely, most LGBTs who know the community find it pleasant and see its meeting spots just as completely "ordinary" places which happen to have a mostly, but not exclusively, LGBT clientele.

Moreover, these locations can in fact be a place of support and encouragement, a sort of protected space where LGBTs have access to alternative role models and thus don't have to fear being looked at or insulted for displaying their affection in public.

Today, there is a wide range of guides to LGBT communities worldwide. These guides are available on the Internet, in specific sections of many newspapers and magazines, in bookshops and, of course, in LGBT meeting spots, i.e. cafes, bars, restaurants, centres, etc. Some of these venues have become local institutions because of their often troubled and glorious past, as well as because they are popular sites for political and social debate. These venues and clubs seem to be quite similar to each other and constitute an international community.

Although the situation in general is improving, most institutions, groups and bars of the LGBT community are based in large cities. That's why many young gays, lesbians, bisexuals and transexuals who live in the suburbs or in the country often visit these cities and make plans to relocate there. They hope that the anonymity of large cities will protect them from prejudice and discrimination and they also hope to find more support and opportunities there.



What does this mean for me?

You could check out the LGBT clubs or facilities in your city in order to get an idea of what they are like. This is the only way you can recommend young LGBTs a location or organisation with a safe conscience, and only if it seems to be appropriate to you. Some LGBT bars are open to everyone, gay and heterosexual men and women are welcome. You can go there, see the location, meet new friends and find a place where the “intersections of diversity” and multiculturalism are not a slogan but principles that are practiced daily.

In large cities, there are even gay, lesbian and bisexual groups for ethnic minorities where people can meet with other people who do not only share their sexual orientation but also their cultural background (see *Appendix 2 of the Crossing Diversity Handbook*).

Education

(Teachers)

Bear in mind

What do you personally think about the LGBT community? Do you have ideas what it may be like? Why do you think this community exists? What benefits does it hold for the teenagers?

For many homosexuals, bisexuals and transexuals, the community is a social network where they are able to meet other gays, lesbians, bisexuals and transexuals, spend their spare time and learn something more about them.

The community provides protection against some widely held behavioural stereotypes and frees its members from the obligation to behave according to traditional gender roles. Generally, gays and lesbians feel comfortable in the community because they can behave in ways that are consistent with what they feel and they do not need to explain or justify themselves. Try to imagine how you would have felt as a teenager if there had been only a few places of your town where you could have been absolutely sure nobody would have criticised for your love or sexual orientation.

The acquaintances made in the community can lead to lasting friendships based on genuine and sincere relationships. The exchange of similar experiences and mutual support can help gays and lesbians to cope with negative reactions to their coming out in the family or at the workplace.

Education - FAQs (Frequently Asked Questions)

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

Why do gays, lesbians, bisexuals and transexuals create their own places? Isn't that a kind of ghetto?

From a very young age, LGBTs are raised as heterosexuals and are taught that homosexual feelings and relationships are not valued in our society. In order to build up their own identity and self-esteem, they need their own spaces where they can express their feelings without being afraid of receiving unpleasant stares or comments.

For a person who is not used to the LGBT community, it may seem like a kind of "ghetto" lifestyle. The LGBT community is not a ghetto but it is perceived as such because we live in a society where the heterosexual norm prevails.

How can I learn more about the local LGBT community?

The easiest way is to look for information on the Internet. Another, and possibly better, way is to visit the local LGBT organisations and ask the members for more information about the activities they are involved in.

Are the meeting spots of the LGBT community open to anyone?

Yes. Gay, lesbian, bisexual and transexual centres are generally open to anyone who is looking for information on their activities and people will usually be pleased to answer your questions (see the webliography included in the Appendix of the Crossing Diversity Handbook or personally look for the centres closest to you). Most cafes, pubs, bars and restaurants are open to anyone, only some nightclubs are "men only" and some lesbian venues are open to women only. If you are not sure, just call and ask before you go.

Education - Tools

Fact and Prejudice Web

Aim: to explore the facts and prejudices surrounding the LGBT community.

Method: ask the students what they think of when they hear the term 'lesbian community' and 'gay community'. Write their comments on the blackboard, connect them with lines that represent associations between them, creating a sort of 'web'. Use different colours to highlight negative and positive comments (e.g. negative = yellow and positive = green). Ask why there are more yellow comments than green ones (which is the most probable outcome) and explore which of these comments are facts, which are stereotypes (judgements which are not congruent with facts), and which are personal opinions or feelings. Check which facts are known about the LGBT community and how the young people learned about it. Explain facts about the LGBT community and its history as you go. Close the session by asking the students if the discussion made them change their minds.

Please note: be sure to prepare yourself so that you can provide adequate information about the local LGBT community. You may consider inviting speakers from a local gay/lesbian/bisexual/transsexual organisation to provide the young people with inside information on local activities. Also prepare yourself for questions from the students about the homosexual "ghetto" and public displays of sexual orientation.

Gay Pride Parade

Aim: to explore the need for visibility of LGBT people.

Method: show a picture of a Gay Pride parade and ask the students if they know what it is about. Encourage them to contribute their own comments. You will probably get some strong negative remarks (for some students, the visibility of homosexuals or some ways of making themselves visible are unacceptable). Discuss the effects of discrimination and pride on a person's identity. Explain the history of Gay Pride (see also *Theme Map 8 "History and Cultures"*). Compare ethnic pride with gay pride.

Please note: many people are shocked by the lifestyles shown at Gay Pride events which, of course, attract a large amount of media attention. During the discussion, take into account the distorting influence of the media and the great variety of homosexual lifestyles which at the end reflects the variety of lifestyles of society in general.

It's a Straight World...

Aim: to explore the effects of heterosexism and to explain the meaning of the LGBT community.

Method: explain that we are all raised to be heterosexual. Also explain that, as a consequence, LGBT teens find themselves in a particular situation and that this work is meant to explore how they may feel. Give the students a few moments to think about this question: "If the world were not heterosexually oriented, but gay/lesbian-oriented, would you go to a 'straight' bar?". An additional question could be: "What would the 'normal' gay population think about this?" Let students share their thoughts and feelings. As the discussion progresses, you could try to steer it and focus it on how the students would like that situation to be. Then draw conclusions which relate to the current situation: how should heterosexuals think about the LGBT community?

Counselling

(Psycho/social/healthcare professionals)

Bear in mind

Ask yourself what you know about the LGBT community, where you got this information from and if you have ever visited the community yourself.

When you counsel young LGBTs, consider that the sense of belonging to the LGBT community might be an integral part of that individual's identity and everyday life. However, some gays, lesbians, bisexuals and transexuals may not feel comfortable with some commercial aspects of the community because they feel a certain pressure to behave and dress "conventionally" and don't (yet) have enough self-esteem to follow their own inclinations. The LGBT community does not solve everyone's problems, it can have both a positive and negative influence on people. Even those who don't often interact with the community are part of this community and are conditioned by its norms and values and, in turn, they will influence the community.

If you are not gay, lesbian, bisexual or transexual yourself, you should at least visit some of the institutions of the community, such as a counselling centre and/or one of the most popular venues. The persons you are counselling may not always be willing to explain every detail of the LGBT community to you, but they might assume you are familiar with it.

If you work in the suburbs, make sure you have some contact addresses to pass on to the people that come to see you for counselling. You can also contact a "coming-out support group" that you can recommend to them or a LGBT organisation that could refer people to you for counselling.

A STORY...



This is complete and utter madness.

I would never have met Patrizia if we hadn't been fighting in the school playground and if Mrs. Gazzi hadn't summoned me to her office because of that. And here I am now, waiting for her, with butterflies in my stomach and wobbly legs. When I see her face in front of mine, I feel a rush of heat through my body.

Teresa pictures those deep brown eyes as they look at her with a sparkle, and then narrow to thin slits with joy. Teresa breathes deeply, or else she won't be able to stand up because of all the excitement. The others mustn't find out about them, even their gay or lesbian friends. Her sexuality is her business only. As well, of course, as Patrizia's. She looks down at the courtyard. She kissed Patrizia for the first time during the Techno Party three weeks ago. Her heart still twinges when she thinks about it. Nothing else matters to her, she just wants to be by her side. Teresa sighs. She would never have thought the world could be so crazy. Her story with Patrizia is so complicated that nobody would ever make sense of it. Teresa lets her eyes drift across the crowd in the café. The lesbians and gays here are really nice people. Mrs. Gazzi was right. There is indeed a gay and lesbian centre here in Bologna and she hadn't even known about it. How ridiculous.

Her love affair with Patrizia has started here. The first time she went there, her hands were sticky with sweat because she was nervous and she was blown away when she saw Patrizia sitting by the window, in the back. Patrizia, of all people. She's a lesbian, thought Teresa, between excitement and shock. She had never realised. Patrizia was like a ray of sunshine illuminating her across the room. Teresa didn't look away.

She simply asked "So finally you found out".

"I would never have thought that you..." Teresa doesn't finish her sentence.

"Lesbians are not all alike" comes the laconic reply from Patrizia. "You have a lot of prejudices in your head".

"But Franca is my best friend. And she's straight. So what?"

"So, nothing." Stumbles Teresa.

"Will you come to the Techno Party with me next Friday? Just you and me?"

Patrizia stares at her for some time, with a little sparkle in her eyes that Teresa would learn to understand later on.

Yes, that's how it all started. But that was the end of a long story. Teresa plays the story in her mind.

The girls of the tenth grade are in the schoolyard, giggling as always. The only one that Teresa likes is Patrizia, but she wouldn't be caught dead ever admitting it. On the contrary, she often taunts Patrizia when she meets her. "So, the little lady has squeezed herself into the supertight jeans again and dipped her little face into the paint box?"

"Stop it, Teresa, get out of my way. Your presence is not welcome here!"

"I really couldn't care less, Patrizia, you know."

"Come on", says Franca "don't pay any attention to that witch says .Why doesn't she leave you alone?"

"And you, do you really have to butt in? ", growls Teresa. "Cause you're the one who looks like a real whore."

"Get lost Teresa, before I lose my temper !" Patrizia's voice sounds dangerously quiet. "Cut it out, save your provocations for someone else. All right?"

"I was only telling you how ridiculous you look and how absolutely stupid your con-

versation is.” Teresa raises the tone of her voice. “Hey look here, isn’t that guy simply adorable? Yesterday in the courtyard he even smiled at me.” She resumes her normal tone. “That bothers you, doesn’t it?”

“You’re just jealous because guys don’t look at you”, says Franca.

“Wrong, Franca, I just don’t want to waste my intelligence on a guy, like you and the other girls do.”

“So why are you still standing here? If our standards don’t suit you, get lost”.

Patrizia pushes Teresa back. That was the last straw.

“Stop fighting. Have you gone completely mad? Patrizia, Teresa, I want you to back off immediately!” Mrs. Gazzi holds the girls apart.

“She started it, she always does”, pants Patrizia.

“Of course”, sneers Teresa. “I always do.”

“Patrizia is telling the truth. Teresa should leave us alone once and for all”, declares Franca and stares at the math teacher.

“Teresa, report to me after the class.” “I would like to show you something. It’s in my office, okay?”

Teresa has always liked her math teacher. She understood something about Teresa, something that no one else noticed.

“You really like Patrizia, don’t you?”

“How can you imagine such a thing?” Teresa feels she was caught off-balance.

“You remind me of myself when I was your age.” Mrs Gazzi winks at her.

“Oh really?” Teresa plays it cool.

“Here we are. Come in. Would you like to sit down?”

“You wanted to show me something?”

“Precisely. A brochure about the Gay Games – just a second.” The teacher rummages through a drawer under the desk. “I thought that, since you are into sports, you’d might want to compete there next year. They’ll certainly need good volleyball players”

“Hey, just a moment” Teresa looks squarely at the teacher “Are you a lesbian?”

“Yes. Does that surprise you? Why don’t you go to the Gay and Lesbian Centre, and try to meet other lesbians? You’re always hanging out alone.”

“I just don’t want to feel looked at like a sex object.”

“Who told you that lesbians are like that?”

“Everybody says it.”

“So you believe everything they say. In any case it’s not true. Gays and lesbians have many interests. They create sports groups, meet to spend time together, for instance to discuss politics – you can share with them whatever you want.”

“Volleyball is a good starting point.” Teresa turns and turns the brochure in her hands.

“Okay. Then I’ll give you the address of the Gay and Lesbian Centre. Do you have Internet?”

“Sure.”

“Here are some websites that could be of interest to you. You can start with these and go on looking from there. My colleague has just told me about a chat for young lesbians and gays that should be very good. I’ll write it down for you. So you can see what is going on in real life. You’ll see, nobody will consider you a mere sex object.”

“And you? Are you part of the scene?”

“Scene may not be the right word. I have many lesbian and gay friends but I usually don’t go out to bars and clubs.”

“I see. Thank you very much!”

“I am glad I could help. And have fun with sports.”



Counselling - FAQs (Frequently Asked Questions)

Please also refer to the FAQs for the education sector.

Where can I find information about psychological support, self-help or counselling services provided by the LGBT community in my area?

You can find many links on the Internet, if you use a search engine you will find many resources in your area. If you plan to refer the person you are counselling to a specific institution, it's important that you are well-acquainted with it. Get to know more by making personal contact with that particular institution.

How should I deal with those who have a bad opinion about the LGBT community?

The gay and lesbian community is more than a cliché. What are their specific interests? It may be they have a negative view because they have not found the support structure they are looking for yet. Encourage them to continue looking for and exploring new areas and services of the community (see also the first question in the "Counselling" section).

Is it always advisable to recommend a person to get involved in the LGBT community?

Generally, the community is very supportive but there can be situations when the person should concentrate on resolving his/her internal and/or external conflicts through individual work. In these cases, you should determine if he/she would benefit from individual or group counselling and refer him/her to a psycho/social/healthcare professional or other appropriate resources.

To avoid disappointment, he/she should be informed exactly on what he/she'll find and where to find it.

How can I handle a person who is afraid of the LGBT community?

Discuss his/her needs in detail and work on different ways to satisfy them. Visiting the LGBT community is only one way of solving problems, and it is neither a "cure-all", nor "the route to happiness". It may take time before a person finds the right place, association or group which best meets him/her needs.



Counselling - Tools

Think about the following questions:

- How can you help a person to work through conflict and use the resources available if he/she feels isolated?
- How can you help a person to work through conflict and use the resources available if he/she is interested in the LGBT community but has some concerns about it?
- What other communities do you know apart from the LGBT one?
- Do the activities/services offered in the LGBT community of your city suit the cultural and individual background of that person?
- To which specific groups does that person belong to besides the homosexual group (e.g. religious, ethnic, sport, gender groups, etc.)?
- Are there groups in your area whose members belong to two or more minorities at the same time (e.g. a group for Turkish gay man, Jewish lesbians, etc.)?



A LGBT Social Network

Aim: helping the person you are counselling to reflect on his/her position within the LGBT social network.

Method: try and find out what images that person has of the LGBT community. Does he/she feels part of the community? Why or why not? Does he/she associate the community with negative imagery? Does he/she meet socially with other LGBT persons outside the community?

Please note: bear in mind that LGBTs who belong to ethnic minorities often do not take part in the community. This may be because they fear they might feel uncomfortable by being once again in a minority position. It can also be due to prejudice and discrimination encountered within the community.

