
Disclosing The Struggle To A Straight Friend

*Why disclosure is important; What is needed from a straight friend;
How to tell him.*

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Most same-sex attracted (SSA) men report an unease in the company of other males that traces back to early childhood. Research confirms this observation—showing a significant correlation between difficulty with male peer relationships during boyhood, and later homosexual orientation.

SSA clients characteristically describe themselves as feeling frustrated and rejected in boyhood because they felt weak, un-

masculine, and unacceptable. and thus they were on the outside of their male peers' activities.

In adulthood, the client's relationship with other men is painfully distorted because of his conflict between the normal assertive drive to relate to males as a "man among men," and the anticipation of shame for being found "not man enough." He seeks, yet fears, a man who will love him. Consequently, he remains chron-

ically distressed since he fears the very thing that he desires most deeply.

Mastering the challenge of establishing, maintaining, and deepening male friendships is essential for the man who desires to overcome his homosexual problem. Non-erotic intimacy with other men is a foundational requirement for the resolution of same-sex attractions, so much so that the client's progress can typically be evaluated by the level of intimacy of his male friendships.

At the start of treatment, many SSA clients will report they "already have" close male friendships. But further inquiry reveals superficial relationships that lack honesty, self-disclosure and mutuality. The client's initial claim to have close male friendships suggests a dimension of self-deception which is based in part upon wishful thinking, and in part upon the inability to realistically assess the possibilities for platonic male-to-male emotional closeness.

SSA men tend to categorize other men in extremes: that is, to "deify or demonize" them. Splitting men into "good vs. bad objects" makes it unlikely that the SSA client will be able to tolerate the normal disagreements which arise in all relationships. The ability to remain emotionally connected to another man while in conflict with him is an issue of critical importance, and will offer an ongoing therapeutic challenge. Intimacy always requires the vulnerability of exposing one's feelings to another person, which is something the client both desires and fears. His assertive drive to relate to other men as an equal remains in conflict with his anticipatory shame and expectation of rejection.

Four Categories Of Male Friendships

For the man in reparative therapy, male friendships can be divided into four categories:

- The gay friend;
- The "non-gay homosexual" friend;
- The straight friend;
- The straight friend to whom he is sexually attracted.

1. *Gay friendships* create the possibility of erotic attraction and a mutually exploitative sexual agenda. Any possibility of honest friendship is contaminated by flirtation and vague innuendoes, with each looking to the other for cues of sexual receptivity. Mutual game-playing and manipulation will undermine efforts at establishing equality and mutuality, and thus will diminish the value of this type of relationship.

2. *Celibate friendships with other non-gay homosexuals* offer him an empathy and special understanding. However, other non-gay homosexual men are limited in their potential to help him break down the male mystique, which is usually reserved for the straight man. Challenges to relationships between two SSA men also include mutual anticipatory shame. Such friendships should be seen primarily as preparation for the more challenging relationship with the less emotionally attuned, heterosexual male.

3. *Heterosexual, non-sexually attractive male friendships* have somewhat more value than those of the previous category. Although life circumstances often put the client into contact with straight men, he feels no motivation to establish a friendship. When the other man seems ordinary, and the old familiar sexual attraction is missing, the SSA man often expresses a dismissive contempt for the straight man, with the preconception that he is uninteresting or "boring." However, such friendships will still offer the opportunity for male bonding.

4. *Heterosexual, sexually attractive male friendships* with men for whom the client feels an erotic attraction will offer the greatest opportunity for healing. Only through such associations can there be the all-important transformation of erotic attraction into true friendship – that is, the demystifying of the distant and mysterious male.

While aesthetic appreciation for this man's good looks and masculine qualities may always be present even when same-sex attraction is overcome, it will become increasingly evident to the client that sexual fantasies do not fit within any mutually respectful male friendship. As the client experiences increasing acceptance and familiarity within the relationship, over time, his feelings grow into male identification, and the original sexual feelings naturally diminish.

This transformational shift from sexual to fraternal (*i.e.*, eros to philia) is the essential healing experience of male homosexuality. In the process, the other man is transformed from an idealized sexual object into a real person, very much like himself.

Of particular therapeutic value is the SSA client's disclosure of his struggle to the straight friend. A very risky and anxiety-producing challenge, this disclosure must be a prudent, calculated gamble. However, if it is met with understanding, a deeply healing experience will result. The exchange will bring the friendship to a new depth of honesty and intimacy.

Why Disclose?

The SSA man will have difficulty accepting and internalizing the affirmation that his straight friend offers. The reason he has trouble internalizing is that he holds the unconscious suspicion (*i.e.*, the shame-based distortion) that "if my straight friend knew about my homosexuality, he would not accept me." This fear is often a manifestation of internalized shame, and being a shame-based distortion, it can block the chance for connectedness.

Deep disclosure, however, is the means through which he will remove the lifelong feeling of estrangement from other men. Any time a person can reveal something negative, embarrassing, or shameful and present it to another person who they regard as good and benevolent, when that second person can hear that disclosure and *accept and understand* the feelings of the person making the disclosure, there is a healing transformation. Personal growth and identity development happen through this *dynamic interaction*.

How To Tell A Straight Friend

When telling a straight friend, it is advisable to avoid such labels for oneself as “homosexual” or “gay,” speaking instead about personal experience—that is, explaining one’s difficulties in terms of childhood deficits and the felt need for acceptance by men. Any mention of one’s feelings of homoeroticism are best presented not as a gay identity, but as a consequence or symptom of these earlier, unmet male needs.

From my many years of experience working with same-sex attracted clients, there seems to be a basic outline that works best for speaking to a straight friend. As mentioned, one should never begin by saying, “I’m homosexual.” Many straight men have been subliminally influenced by popular misinformation, and so the tendency is to immediately see their friend as having been “born gay,” as if his unwanted feelings could indeed define him. Rather, the disclosure to the straight friend should be done in five steps:

Family Background. “This is the kind of relationship I had with my father...” (and the relationship with the mother, older brother) ... “These are my childhood experiences” (sexual abuse, intimidation by peers, etc.), describing a felt deficit of masculinity where he did not feel strong and confident in his gender identification.

The Consequences of the Family Background. “As a result of these experiences, I didn’t feel like one of the guys. I didn’t know how to fulfill that deficit inside myself.”

Same-Sex Exploration. “Because of those feelings about myself, I found myself searching for masculine connectedness, and that search led me to sexual behaviors with other men that left me dissatisfied, and which did not represent who I am or what I believe.”

Healing Through Authentic Friendships. “Now I realize that it is not really sex that I am after, but rather emotional connection with other men. Our friendship is important to me as an opportunity to fulfill my normal male emotional needs and to help me solidify my true, heterosexual identity.”

When presented in this four-step outline, most straight men seem to understand. If the client reveals himself honestly to the mature and caring straight friend, the response is almost always positive.

What The Client Needs From A Straight Friend

What does the client need from his straight friend? He needs—

To be *understood*, not to be patronized; nor to be mischaracterized as gay—but to have another man know him and understand what the struggle is about. To accomplish this, the client will need to educate his friend on the SSA developmental pathway, and the deficits and needs which are the basis of these unwanted attractions.

To be *accepted* and to be able to trust that this disclosure does

not modify, qualify, or diminish in any way **the fundamental acceptance** of his friend. The unconditional **acceptance** should be manifest and demonstrated.

To be *supported* by his friend in his continued **struggle**. The straight friend can be actively encouraging of what his friend is trying to accomplish.

To have *accountability* (optional), where he can go to his friend and be accountable for his future behavior. It is not unusual for the friend to disclose and ask for equal accountability for his own sexual problems, often involving heterosexual pornography.

Sometimes disappointment arises when the friend shows the SSA struggler his initial support and understanding, but never again discusses the issue. This usually happens because the friend does not know if he should mention the issue again. We recommend the explicit request—“Please ask...” In doing so, both men feel free to continue the healing dialogue. Otherwise, the struggler will avoid mentioning their issue again for fear of “bothering or burdening” their friend. It is best when there is an agreement between both men for the struggler to disclose whenever there is a homosexual enactment.

Each layer of disclosure depends upon the **previous one**. The client cannot experience the benefits of **disclosure** until his straight friend first supports him; and he cannot **support** until he first accepts; and he cannot accept until he **understands**. I have always been amazed, however, at the **encouraging** and supportive response of straight men to the SSA **struggler**.

How To Establish A Friendship

Many of the men in reparative therapy are **so hungry** for male intimacy they truly don’t have the basic **understanding** of how males in fact make friends. While other **boys were** learning how to establish male peer relationships during **the latency** period, our client was typically in isolation, absorbed in **fantasy**. Therefore, he has to take a “crash course” to **catch up in learning** how men have friendships.

The SSA client needs to understand that **there are** two types of male friendship. There’s the casual **relationship**, in which category there might be eight to 10 male **acquaintances**—men he may see at work or in social situations; **these are men who** know each other by name, and there might be **some small exchange** of conversation in a very casual way. In a **completely different** category, however, is the close friendship that **he most needs**. Those deep male friendships will come out of **this larger pool** of casual friends.

Resistance

Besides shame-based fear, another **form of resistance** encountered is the client’s negative **projections onto** straight men—his idea, “Who needs them?” Straight men may be described by him as crude, coarse, shallow, **insensitive**, narrow-minded, stiff, “dumb s**ts,” and “Neanderthals.”

The client will be surprised **when in a course** of time, he discov-

ers that straight men have their own doubts and insecurities. These revelations are valuable in facilitating his identification with them.

Indeed, there are some observable differences between gay-identified and straight men. Clients who are in one psychotherapy group with homosexual men and another group with straight men, will observe and report the differences. Straight men banter at each other with an overt, direct verbal tussling, lacking hidden innuendo. There is more interruption, more blunt disagreement, more friendly "insults," with a generally challenging exchange. Homosexually-oriented men, on the other hand, engage in more indirect exchanges, are easily hurt by any suggestion of criticism, and are quick to misinterpret others' comments as motivated by

an intent to harm.

Eliciting From Within

The client's salient male friends do not give him their masculinity, but offer him the emotional support that will elicit the same-sex-attracted man's own, un-actualized masculinity from within. As in the philosophy of education, we do not understand the teacher to "pour algebra into the brain" of the child; rather, the teacher "elicits the algebra already existing within" the child's own latent potentialities. Thus, it is vital for the SSA struggler to find salient friends – such as mature men from within his own faith community—who will offer him concern, support, encouragement and healing.

