

Different in More Ways Than One.

Providing Guidance for Teenagers on Their Way to Identity, Sexuality and Respect

5 Gay-specific Counselling

“Oh, would you please be so kind as to clean my bedside locker as well.” Eileen turns around. “I am not the cleaning woman. One day I’ll be your doctor.”

“Then please call Dr Mayer. I don’t want to be looked after by a nigger.” Without a word Eileen lays the enema on the night table and leaves the patient’s room.

“Hello Eileen”, beams up Kristin. “Hey, how was your day?” “My mother thinks I’m not capable of looking after people and patients mistake me for the cleaning woman – it’s been a great day. And how are you?” Kristin reels back, frightened. Her heart beats wildly. Just don’t say anything wrong again.

“I’m so happy to see you,” She tries a little laugh.

“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 have cooked something lovely for us two. Will 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 knife? And the nice wineglasses. And the serviettes don’t match the china at all. Don’t you see?”

“Hey, it doesn’t matter anyway” Kristin throws an angry look at Eileen.

“I prefer to eat this way.”

“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 in any old way.”

“It’s not just thrown there. It’s just my style, not yours.”

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Framework

First of all

Lesbian and gay teenagers may seek counselling for a variety of concerns. Some of their requests have to do with their sexual orientation: “Am I gay?”; “I’m unhappy”; “I am also attracted to women – am I bisexual?”; “Whom can I tell?”; “How can I cope?”

However, adolescents will more likely not ask directly for counselling, and they do not ask such questions. Their uneasiness with their sexual orientation may be reflected indirectly: through dropping out of school, isolation, drug addiction etc. It is hard to get in touch with those adolescents who do not contact social services themselves; in fact, it is sometimes their family who make the first contact. To complicate things, the families of young people coming from ethnic minorities are often reluctant to get in touch with social services to ask questions related to their children’s sexual orientation.

Schools represent a good context for addressing such issues and for getting in touch with a large number of young people; it is the place where teenagers can be educated to be respectful, while adolescents who are not yet sure of their sexual identity as well as gay and lesbian teenagers – who are hiding their sexual orientation – can be reassured.

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

The invisibility of homosexuality in the curriculum and in health/social services programmes is another factor which can isolate lesbian and gay adolescents. Moreover, the stigmatisation felt by gays and lesbians at school, in health care, or in social service institutions may add to other sources of stress and compromise their psycho-social adaptability.

There are different institutional difficulties which may obstruct homospecific counselling. A teacher proposing this issue may face resistance from both parents and the school administration. Even in the health services, a counsellor who wishes to promote a specific service for the gay, lesbian and bisexual population may run into opposition.

Adolescents constantly manifest their curiosity about sexuality and adults convey their specific values on the subject, both when they talk about it and when they don’t. Therefore, addressing the topic of homo- and bisexuality next to heterosexuality in a professional way in both schools and health services is not the same as “promoting” it. The question of sexual orientation affects all adolescents. Assuming that 5 – 10 % of the total population has a same-sex orientation and that the percentage of same-sex behaviour is even higher, a teacher is bound to have at least one gay, lesbian or bisexual student in the class.

Homospecific counselling may be affected by biased, inadequate or inappropriate practices on the part of the counsellor. Some examples of bad practices and bias in the counselling process include: believing that homosexuality is a form of psychopathology; automatically attributing a client’s problems to her or his sexual orientation; automatically assuming that a client is heterosexual; failing to recognize the client’s symptoms as stemming from internalised homophobia; not recognizing the effects of double or triple discrimination (woman, lesbian and coloured, handicapped).

What does this mean for me?

- Raise awareness on the topic of homosexuality and same-sex-lifestyles among educators and counsellors. Pay more attention to sexuality and related subjects in counselling; promote active training and provide written materials for employees.
- Integrate the acceptance of ethnic and sexual minorities and their lifestyles into your institution's official profile and/or practical approach and advertise this ("diversity management").
- Offer a variety of services: prevention, intervention, education
- Reflect an intercultural approach among educators and counsellors working in the institution
- Network with other professional institutions in order to gain access to the specific knowledge and experience of ethnic and/or sexual minority experts (partners in family support, health care services, education, etc.).
- Network with other self-help and support groups: sexual minorities need these services as they provide positive role models.
- Pay attention to quality standards (i.e. regarding the structure of homospecific counselling: profile, concept, specific communication, co-operation with other professional health care services, etc.)

Education

Bear in mind

Teachers and youth workers should reflect on the following points:

- What is your personal level of acceptance/tolerance regarding the topic of homosexuality and same-sex lifestyles (own point of view/bias, role, “blind spots” etc.)?
- What is your own level of commitment to the topic (try to assess this realistically: how much do I want to get involved in this topic, when and where will I take a clear stand on this topic, etc.)
- What is the general level of acceptance/tolerance regarding the topic of homosexuality and same-sex lifestyles within the institution (the attitude of the school administration, of colleagues, of financiers, of the board, etc.)
- What is the general level of acceptance/tolerance of gay, lesbian and bisexual feelings among the students in the classroom or among the peers in youth centres (e.g. is homo- and bisexuality a subject of discussion or is it taboo; messages about homo- and bisexuality and gender roles)
- What is the general level of acceptance/tolerance of gay or lesbian feelings among parents (and also the attitude of their representative boards, etc.)
- What is the general situation of gay and lesbian pupils in the school or youth group setting when it comes to the relations with their classmates and peers (interaction with other teenagers, teasing, bullying, anti-gay violence and discrimination)

Education

Tools

Ethnic Stereotypes

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

Method: Take two pieces of cardboard, draw a shape and then ask the participants to fill in the shapes by answering the question: “It is common knowledge that Moroccans are ...” (Italians are..., the Dutch are ...). The answers should then be discussed in the group. 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 gays and lesbians.

Please note: Make it clear that these are just stereotypes and that they can be offensive (this may not be self-evident). If there is only one person representing a particular group in the class – for instance, only one person from Morocco – it would be preferable not to use Moroccans as one of the examples.

Belonging to a Group

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

Method: Ask the students to think about all the different groups they belong to (e.g. men, Turks, football players, Scouts, brothers, etc.) Give the young people three pieces of paper and ask them to write on each one of them: “Which groups am I proud to belong to?”, “Which groups do I not want to belong to?”, “Which groups am I ashamed to belong to?” The (anonymous) pieces of paper should be hung on the blackboard and then discussed in the group.

Please note: This exercise is not recommended for small groups or other 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 proposing 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 typical feelings and behaviours which are shown when people of different cultures and identities meet (e.g. meetings between immigrants and resident population; meetings between heterosexuals and homosexuals).

Method: The participants sit in a circle while one person volunteers to go out of the room. When he/she comes back, the people in the circle must welcome them in a manner suggested by the leader in the form of a key word (interest, indifference, aggressiveness, openness...). Different participants can play the role of the “newcomer”.

Please note: When choosing a pupil for the role of the “newcomer”, the teacher should select someone who is not stigmatised within the class and has no difficulties integrating into the group.

Education

F.A.Q.s (Frequently Asked Questions)

Please also refer to the F.A.Q.s for the counselling and health care sector.

Is it my job as a teacher to counsel pupils who may be gay or lesbian?

Counselling pupils is not a teacher's primary function. However, it may become necessary for you to intervene in certain cases for various reasons. For example, a pupil may be the victim of a homophobic bully in the class or you may notice a pupil's performance deteriorating and you suspect it may be related to their confusion about homosexuality.

Isn't there a role conflict if I am supposed to be an unbiased teacher on the one hand and an understanding and empathic counsellor on the other?

Yes, but these are reconcilable. First of all, it is important for you to be very clear on these possibly diverging positions and, secondly, that you make this transparent when talking to the pupil in question. You can say that his or her grades / participation / attitude in class / etc. are not up to standard and that it is not possible for you to compromise on such questions. On the other hand, you can offer to talk openly about a problem and to constructively support any means to solve that problem – and that that won't have any effects on your grading.

As a youth worker in a youth centre, I don't feel comfortable counselling teenagers on homosexuality – I'm afraid I will lose the acceptance of the majority of the other young people if they find out.

That is not necessarily the case. Try to assess your own personal level of acceptance regarding the topic of homosexuality and same-sex lifestyles. Generally, it is possible to communicate a standpoint clearly and commandingly without losing your authority if you yourself are confident and unambiguous concerning the topic of homosexuality (refer also to "bear in mind" for education.).

How do I create a setting in which a pupil can talk openly about his/her homosexuality?

By signalling that you are open and unbiased. Then – and this is very important – make sure that you tell the pupil that everything you talk about will be kept in the strictest confidence unless you both agree to speak to another person. It can be helpful to remind the pupil that a confidential talk won't have any effect on grading. Also make sure that you are not observed or overheard by a third party.

Can I talk to my colleagues or to my boss about a counselling session with a specific pupil?

No. You are bound by professional discretion and would severely breach confidentiality if you spoke to others about a specific boy or girl (naming or indicating him/her). If you want to reflect on a counselling session with another person, refer to the pupil in question as a "15-year old girl" or a "13-year old boy". The person you are referring to should not be identifiable through your definition.

“Why don’t you tell your parents that you are a lesbian?” Eileen draws back a bit, away from Kristin, who immediately pulls the cover up to the tip of her nose.

“I’m not ready for it. 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 it doesn’t have to become common knowledge. Do I have to be pigeonholed like that?”

“It’s not a pigeonhole, it’s an identity. Just like my being black. You carry it with you all your life.”

“And like I come from the lower classes”, asks Kristin.

“Why do you always ramble on and on with this idiotic lower classes discussion? You’re not getting downtrodden because of that, are you?”

“No, but everyone gives me to understand that I should be ashamed of myself, because at home we don’t have classic music, I don’t go around in 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 a theatre, or to the States during the 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 woman, 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, when 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 love you too, so much.”

“So it’s all right, isn’t it?”

“Kristin, you have of late been daydreaming a wee bit too much, in my opinion”. Mrs Metz glares sternly over her glasses. “Feeling attracted to girls is a very normal stage of puberty. One should try oneself out. You’ll see, the right boy will come along after all. We all go through this phase. But the school must not be left behind, is that clear?”

“Sometimes I feel so much behind 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’re barely sixteen yet, at that age it’s frequently difficult to be a lesbian. Eileen is a few years ahead of you.”

to be continued next page

“We often argue about silly things”, says Eileen. “Things that are really just laughable. What colour should the serviettes be, for instance.”

“Perhaps neither one of you dares to think about your feelings for other girls yet, and you project your fear into such 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, “the rest”, Kristin?”

“Well for one thing, Eileen often gets harassed because of 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 opposes me so strongly because I’ve 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’re lesbian, 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 on the part of the people around you makes having a harmonious relationship very difficult.”

“I’m not quite sure” wonders Kristin.

“I couldn’t care less about ‘the people around me’” yells Eileen. “The only thing that interests me is what Kristin thinks of me.”

“Okay.” The counsellor looks at Kristin. “What is your feeling about this, Kristin?”

“I love Eileen and I think she’s absolutely great. But I often feel inferior to her.”

“And you Eileen, what do you think of Kristin?”

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

“And how do these fears come about, both of you?”

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

“That’s a pity. We unfortunately have to stop for the moment. If you want, you can come again and we try to track down the reasons.”

“I don’t think she’s understood us.” Kristin steps disgruntled on an empty Coke tin.

“There’s something jammed up about her, that has nothing to do with us”, says Eileen.

“I don’t know if she believes us when we tell her we’re perfectly happy with being lesbians.”

“That’s right” smiles Kristin, “Unfortunately, neither do the others”

the end

Counselling and Health Care

Bear in mind

Some specific aspects of homospecific counselling are:

- the client's psycho-sexual history: sexuality in the family, messages about (homo- or bi-) sexuality,
- sexual identity: how your client sees him- or herself in terms of his/her sexuality, gender role and identity,
- the client's level of acceptance of gay or lesbian feelings,
- the history of the client's coming out,
- the gay/lesbian social network,
- lifestyles,
- anti gay/lesbian violence and discrimination ("gay-bashing", "lesbian baiting") – as well as violence and discrimination against transgendered individuals.

It is necessary to think about these aspects in terms of your own personal history, even if you do not identify yourself as a homosexual. It will help you to better understand the client and to understand your own prejudice.

If in fact you are gay or lesbian, you should think about the effect that knowing this may have for your client. Many gays and lesbians lack role models. As a counsellor, you can be very important in this respect. However, the most important thing is how you perceive your own homosexuality: what has your personal development been like? What could be helpful for your client to know about your homosexuality? Remember the client should not completely identify with you. Every gay, lesbian and bisexual person has to develop his or her own personal lifestyle and goes through his or her own version of a personal acceptance process.

Counselling and Health Care Tools

Specific aspects in counselling gays and lesbians and how to address them:

Search for the “Why-Question” (Sexual Identity)

Aim: to help the client, in his/her search for self-definition, distinguish between sexual orientation and identity, do not take the sexual identity of your client as granted.

Method: What does your client call him/herself and which meaning does he/she give to these “labels”? Discuss what experiences your client has had regarding same-sex behaviour. Distinguish between their sexual orientation and expectations in the past, present and future. Discuss role models and identity with the client. Deal with prejudices; they are an indication of internalised homophobia.

Please note: Focus also on the question of how the client thinks others perceive him/her. This serves to bring up key issues such as the importance of external perception and the fear of rejection.

Gay-Bashing

Aim: To counsel victims of gay-bashing, homophobic violence and discrimination.

Method: Has the client ever experienced physical, psychological or verbal attacks; if so were these direct or indirect? Did the attacks involve sexual violence? When did the attack happen and who was the attacker? How does this experience affect being gay or lesbian or being “out”? Discuss the pros and cons of reporting the incident to the police with the client.

Please note: It helps to be familiar with specific counselling skills relating to trauma and violence beforehand. It is usually in gay cruising areas that gay men encounter violence. Therefore, before advising the client to take their case to the authorities, be absolutely sure of the way your local police deals with anti-homosexual violence. Are there specific consultation partners in the police force who understand this form of violence? Are they male or female? A lesbian victim is unlikely to consult a male police officer.

Counselling and Health Care

F.A.Q.s (Frequently Asked Questions)

Please also refer to the F.A.Q.s for the education sector.

How can I recognise, for instance, whether the girl who is standing in front of me is a lesbian?

Basically, you can't. One of the characteristics of homosexuality is that it doesn't show and your client can hide it if he or she chooses to. This is why it is extremely important to have an open attitude, to ask questions, and to create a space where your client can be open about his/her sexual identity or behaviour.

How much should I involve the family in the counselling process?

It depends very much on the importance of the family in the client's life and the level of acceptance or rejection within the family. Ask your client about it and also ask if he/she is willing to do it. Family is an important social environment, but also a vulnerable one.

Do gay men and lesbians need special counselling?

Not always, but they do need specific attention and recognition concerning gay and lesbian issues, for their personal history and for their current situation. This can be done in any kind of therapy. (Refer to sections "Bear in mind" and "Tools".)

Who is better at handling homosexual clients: a counsellor belonging to a sexual minority, or one who is straight?

Both are possible. As a straight counsellor, you should try to ask the right questions and avoid being too vague. As a counsellor from a sexual minority, you have to be aware of the impact you may have as a role model and you should be aware of over-identification issues. If your client raises the issue, you should answer frankly to his/her questions.

“It really helped me when I finally spoke to a counsellor with whom, you know, I didn’t have the feeling I first had to explain ‘what being lesbian is all about’, that there is nothing wrong with it, that it’s OK... Especially since I didn’t really have any answers in the first place. I was full of questions myself! “

Imprint

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ing, also partially, is only permitted
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Produced with the contribution of
the European Community Action
Programme to combat discrimina-
tion.

Düsseldorf, August 2004