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# The Heterosexual Victims of Homophobia



What are the consequences of some people's fear of homosexuality? Terry Sanderson examines the devastating effects on some groups of people. He is an experienced counsellor and author.

THE WOMAN on the phone to the counselling line was distraught, but there was also a very obvious anger in her voice. "Homosexuality," she was saying, "it's ruined my life."

Not that she herself was homosexual — her distress sprang from her eldest son's recent "coming out" as gay. "Why did this have to happen to us?" she demanded. "He's such a good boy and we've tried hard to bring him up properly. Why should he turn out this way?"

Again she cited homosexuality as the reason for her troubles, but like so many people in her situation homosexuality was only a symptom. The real problem — hidden beneath the confusion and guilt — was homophobia, which seems able to get to places that other prejudices just can't reach.

The word *homophobia* was coined in 1967 (by the author Wainwright Churchill in his book *Homosexual Behaviour Among Males*) to describe the irrational fear that many heterosexuals feel for gay people. For those on the receiving end — homosexuals themselves — it seems an accurate description; as one counsellor who deals with its effects said: "Homophobia shares many characteristics with other phobias, ranging from mild feelings of discomfort in the presence of gay men and lesbians, to an overwhelming repulsion, sometimes creating physical symptoms such as nausea or panic. It is not unusual to hear straight men and women claiming that homosexuals make them sick and then rationalising the revulsion with talk of "unnatural sexual practices" and "disgusting perversions". Homophobia seems capable of overcoming all logic, and education alone seems incapable of eradicating it. The myths and fears that homosexuality arouses, particularly in straight men, are so strong that violence often results.

Homosexuals themselves are familiar with this reaction and are becoming increasingly aware of a deepening of hostility towards them. Aids has given a new impetus to homophobia. Many cope by denying their homosexuality and staying in the closet — "passing for straight" as it is known in gay circles.

This constant self-denial and the fact that they have been exposed to negative ideas about themselves since they were very young, makes it difficult for some gay people to develop a sense of self-worth. After all, if you're told at your mother's knee that gays are bad, sad, silly or sinful, then the internalisation of such opinions becomes inevitable. Later in life it becomes almost impossible to shake them off. Homophobia leaves many gay men and lesbians deeply scarred psychologically, so deeply scarred that they can become the worst homophobes of all, hating not only themselves but anyone else who is gay. This effect was noted by the American academic Laud Humphrys who, in his study of "cottagers" (*Tearoom Trade*) labelled it The Breast Plate of Righteousness. Gay men and women who are ill-at-ease with their sexuality, victims of internalised homophobia, can become virulent anti-gay "moral crusaders".

The repercussions of homophobia are felt through the whole of society. Hundreds of thousands of men and women who are homosexual spend their lives trying either to deny their sexuality completely, or accommodating it in semi-secrecy. The resulting misery is, even these days, enormous, and mostly hidden. Quite often, too, religion is used as a justification for the persecution. Religious fundamentalist groups have, over the past few years, manipulated the issue of homosexuality quite outrageously. They have declared war on the gay community and used it as a rallying point to unite their own tawdry troops. The constant efforts to have funding for Aids education stopped by making out that it is simply a front for homosexual propaganda, is the latest and saddest tactic used by the righteous Right.

Having counselled gay men and women over the past fifteen years, I have seen at first hand the damage that homophobia — external or internal — can do to individuals. I have also seen the effects spill over and engulf those who are closest to the victims.

Dave came to me for help when he was 27. He had been married for eight years and has two children. He told me that he had always known, deep down, that he was gay, but he had hoped that by marrying and having a family it would somehow "make it go away". It didn't. He made titanic efforts to overcome his attraction to other men and to devote himself to his wife and children, but then he met Tim, a younger man who was much more relaxed with his sexuality. Dave fell in love with this outgoing and uncluttered man, and realised that he could not maintain his own pretence any longer.

He had married, he said, to escape from the homosexuality which he felt would be unacceptable to his family, friends and colleagues at work. He was acutely aware of his peers' disapproval of all things gay. "Whenever I went out with my mates there always seemed to be somebody telling queer jokes or expressing some kind of contempt for homosexuals." In the macho atmosphere of the factory where he worked he could not bring himself to admit to being "one of them" and so, to prove to his mates — and to an extent himself — that he was not one of the dreaded queers, he did what he thought was the right thing and married his girlfriend Shirley.

"I loved Shirley at the time we got married, and I'm still very fond of her now," says Dave, "And I'm crazy about my two daughters. But I couldn't pretend that things hadn't changed when I met Tim. The love I felt for him was quite different to that I felt for my wife. It has more meaning for me, it's more intense somehow. It seems real in a way that it never did when I was married to Shirley."

Dave eventually plucked up the courage to tell Shirley what was going on. She was devastated and even now, after two years apart, her bitterness towards him has not lessened. Dave has only very limited access to his daughters, something which hurts him deeply. He is convinced that his daughters will grow up hating him simply because Shirley bears him great animosity which he has no way of counteracting.

Another set of relationships which Dave has seen damaged is that with his parents, who have sided with Shirley and the children. While they have not disowned him entirely, their attitude is decidedly cool, and they refuse to acknowledge the relationship Dave has with Tim.

As a consequence of Dave's refusal to confront the homophobia which he had internalised, three other lives have been deeply affected and many others made unhappy. "If only I'd had the guts to face up to the truth before I married Shirley, a lot of misery could have been avoided. If only."

The depth of hate that Dave felt for his sexuality shouldn't be underestimated. Homophobia is a powerful force that propels otherwise balanced people into secretive and distorted lives. It is not the homosexuality that caused this problem, but fear of it.

Brenda, the woman described at the beginning of this article, rang me when her son Mark came out as gay. She was distraught and blamed herself for what she saw as a great catastrophe. "Where did we go wrong?" she asked repeatedly, "We tried so hard to bring up the children in a way that would make us proud of them."

Her husband's response was even worse: he was completely unable to cope with the news and reacted with violent anger. He ordered Mark out of the family home and said he never wanted to see him again. Brenda tried to reason with her husband, but he was totally out of control, insisting that he wouldn't have a "pervert" living under his roof.

Mark packed his bags and left six months ago and they haven't heard from him since. Brenda remains bewildered, but her anger has passed and she wants to try and understand her son. Her husband, though, refuses even to talk about it, despite being made physically ill by the breaking up of the family.

But what is the root of this family's distress? Is it their son's homosexuality or their own inability to cope with it? I have met many other gay men who have "come out" to their families with much greater ease, their honesty having been received with understanding and support. These families were not afflicted with homophobia, and did not hesitate to afford their sons the dignity and respect they needed. Those who are free from homophobia are spared the grief that goes with hating those you love. As Brenda said: "It's a terrible thing when you begin to detest your own child. I couldn't work out why Mark was doing this to us, why he wanted to spoil our lives with this terrible thing. I tried to talk to his father, but he was so repelled by it that he just walked away when I tried to raise the subject."

It took a long time and a great deal of counselling before Brenda admitted to herself that she was the owner of the feelings she had expressed towards Mark. Indeed, they originated entirely within herself. Mark had not changed — but her perception of him had. When she recognised this she began to see that the confusion had not been created by Mark, but by her own deep feelings of disquiet about homosexuality. At this stage she seemed happier and longed to be able to talk to her son about this new realisation. She lives in hope that he will contact her so that she can apologise and, as she puts it, "let him know that I love him, whatever he thinks of me".

Delia left her husband ten years ago, taking her son with her. She set up home with Iris, a woman she had met at work. They lived happily in a lesbian relationship until Delia's son was thirteen and began to become conscious of the nature of the household in which he was living. At school his friends had picked up on the situation and were ribbing him about it.

"I felt so sorry for him," said Delia. "He was utterly miserable because of the taunting that was going on at school. He didn't tell us about it, of course, we heard about it from one of the teachers at the open day. We thought he was old enough to have the whole situation explained to him so that he could understand. The problem was that he wouldn't listen — didn't want to hear, I suppose. Whenever we tried to raise the subject he would make excuses to go somewhere else. It started to cause rows between Iris and me. The whole household was beginning to split up because of it. It was like a test of loyalties between her and Richard — she was demanding that I tell him and Richard was saying he didn't want to hear. That also meant that he didn't approve. He became very distant with Iris — whereas up until then he'd treated her as a second mother."

The baiting at school became so bad that Richard began to get into trouble, shoplifting and playing truant, eventually causing a social worker to be assigned to the household. The social worker was sympathetic, but the strain on the two women eventually caused them to part. Now Delia and Richard live in a council flat, while Iris is thinking of taking a job abroad to escape her misery.

Once more homophobia triumphs and three lives are scarred. Gays do not exist in a vacuum and when they are hurt or victimised because of their sexuality, the ripples can spread widely. The families and friends of homosexual men and lesbians are hurt, too, as the hate and rejection which characterise homophobia enters their lives.

What is the answer? Homophobia, like racism, has deep roots in our society. Education is inadequate and what little exists is ineffective. Any official attempts to neutralise the power of irrational and damaging attitudes towards gay people are frequently greeted with hostility.

It seems the only effective challenge to homophobia's power comes from direct experience. Just as with other phobias, only by confronting it can the source of our fear be overcome.