

# For the Strength of Gay Youth



## A Guide for Gay, Lesbian, and Bisexual Mormon Youth and Young Adults

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# Introduction

## About This Booklet

Several years ago, the First Presidency issued a pamphlet called "For the Strength of Youth."<sup>1</sup> This pamphlet was intended to be a guide for young men and young women of the Church, providing them with counsel and direction in their daily life.

While the intentions and motivations behind the pamphlet may have been positive, it has often been a source of great frustration for many youth and young adults. Unfortunately, this booklet from the First Presidency has caused many youth to experience feelings of self-loathing, self-hatred and confusion. This is especially true for youth in the Church who experience attractions to the same gender.

It is my intention to provide a guide similar to the pamphlet "For the Strength of Youth", but modified so that it is especially designed to address the unique concerns of gay and lesbian youth of the Church.

## Message to Gay and Lesbian Mormon Youth

One of the most difficult challenges that any young person in the Church can face is learning how to deal with being gay and Mormon. A few of the many questions that could arise from these issues could be:

- "Can I be gay and active in the Church?"
- "When should I tell my Bishop?"
- "How can I cope with all of this?"
- "I know I'm gay, but should I still serve a mission?"



There are no easy answers to anything in life that challenges us, and this small booklet certainly doesn't claim to provide any easy or quick answers, nor does it claim to have all the answers to your questions. Rather, I hope that this booklet can give some basic information and suggestions for youth in the Church who identify with being attracted to the same gender. Throughout this booklet, I will refer to the people who experience these attractions as "gay, lesbian and bisexual."

The advice presented in this pamphlet has been gathered from several youth and young adults who have all faced some of the very same questions that you may be facing right now.

If you are a youth or young adult who is facing some of the difficult issues associated with being gay and Mormon, one of the most important things to remember is that you are not alone. As you read these words, there are countless others who have walked and are currently walking the very same path that you now journey. When you realize that you aren't alone and that there are others who actually understand what you are going through, these challenges become easier to handle. The goal of this booklet is to help show you that you are not alone and to help ease some of your burdens you may feel about being gay and Mormon.

# Topics

## Agency

The principle of agency, or the ability to make one's own choices for his or her life, is a God-given gift (2 Nephi 2:27). Regardless of what sex you may be attracted to, you have the opportunity to live your life the way you see fit. There are many myths and misconceptions about what it means to be gay or lesbian, both within the Church and in the general public. Some people would classify all life choices of gay and lesbian people into a term called the "gay lifestyle." There actually is no "gay lifestyle" any more than there is a "straight lifestyle." Everyone has the ability to create his or her own lifestyle. Be very cautious about accepting counsel from anyone who would tell you that a person's race, religion, gender, sexual orientation, or any other classification automatically makes him or her destined to live a certain "lifestyle". Your life, quite simply, is **your** life. You have the power to make it what you want it to be.

## Activity in the Church



The level of participation you wish to have as a member of the Church is something only you can decide. This is because spiritual matters are very personal, and every person's experience as a member of the Church is unique. It can be both fortunate and unfortunate that local leadership in the Church is administered by everyday people. It can be fortunate for gay Mormons, when a bishop or stake president is compassionate and understanding about homosexual members of the Church. It can be unfortunate when leaders have had little or no experience dealing with gay and lesbian Church members or when leaders say or do unkind things because they lack understanding. For this reason, each person will have unique experiences with their sexual orientation and their membership in the Church. Some people will decide to continue activity and participation in the Church, while others will have such negative experiences that they may decide to leave the Church. Leaving the Church or being excommunicated can be a very difficult emotionally. Support groups are available in communities with a large proportion of Latter-day Saints for those who have been through this experience. Some of these support groups are listed in the Resources section of this booklet.

Even among those who decide to continue activity and participation in the Church (in whatever degree) many have found great satisfaction in attending worship services in other churches and synagogues. Some may even choose to attend gay friendly churches or synagogues. Many General Authorities have taught that many great truths can be found in other religions. You may be surprised what you may learn by attending a worship service of another church. A listing of gay-friendly religious groups and churches (including those that have an LDS theme) is listed in the Resources section of this booklet. Some people also testify that they have found a greater degree of spirituality outside organized religions than what they experienced while they were involved with one. There are quite a number of spiritual paths that also could be considered "self instructional" and don't require a person to attend an organized worship service. Other people have no formal spiritual path and create their own spiritual practices.

Again, it is important to understand that we all travel different paths in life. No path is more correct than another and we should never judge a person for the path that he or she travels. No matter what path you choose, remember that God loves you unconditionally. This is a universal truth taught by almost every religion, including Mormonism.

## Missions & Other Church Callings

A large part of being actively involved in the Church is accepting callings and church assignments. Often the person being called to a church assignment is required to pass a "worthiness" interview. If you are extended a call to serve in some capacity in your ward or stake, keep in mind that the General Authorities have stated that simply being attracted to the same sex is not a sin.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, you should not feel obligated to make your sexual orientation known during an interview for a calling or temple recommend. However, if you have been involved in sexual activity with the same sex, it is up to you to decide if this is something your Church leader should be made aware of.



Should I go on a mission? See comments on the Affirmation Blog

Another common question that gay and lesbian Mormon youth have is if they should serve a full-time mission. This is a very difficult question to answer, because so many issues involved with serving a mission such as pressure from family and Church leaders, feeling worthy to serve, and having concerns about sexual tension with same-sex missionary companions.

Affirmation, the first organization for gay and lesbian Mormons, gives this wonderful advice for those who are contemplating service as a full-time missionary:

Many gay or lesbian Mormons--gay men especially--have served missions. Many say that their mission was an important positive experience in their lives. Others look back on their mission as a very negative experience.

Here are some things to consider as you grapple with this decision: As a missionary, you will be with a same-sex companion twenty-four hours a day. It's not uncommon to hear gay returned missionaries joke about being attracted to their companions, but in fact that kind of sexual tension can be highly stressful. A mission is a time of intense same-sex bonding; it's also a time when you will be susceptible to feeling lonely or down. How will you cope with the temptations that situation will create?

The Church, for its part, does not want gay missionaries: individuals who have confessed to homosexual acts are supposed to wait three years before they can be cleared for missionary service (individuals who have confessed to heterosexual acts only have to wait one year). Therefore, to serve a mission as a gay or lesbian person, you will have to be closeted. How will being closeted affect your spiritual or emotional health?

Missionary service is meant to prepare you for adulthood as a Latter-day Saint. This includes a lifetime of church activity, not to mention temple marriage and raising a family. If you have accepted that you are gay or lesbian--and if one of your goals is a same-sex partnership--then you're setting yourself up for a life path

very different from the one that a mission is meant to set you up for. What do you see as the benefits of serving a mission, given your life goals as a gay or lesbian person? If you decide to serve a mission despite the serious challenges that mission life presents for a gay or lesbian person, you need to be absolutely clear about why you're doing this.<sup>3</sup>

## The Scriptures

One of the most common questions among members of the Church who are just coming to terms with their sexual identity, is what the scriptures say about homosexuality.



Since the purpose of this booklet is to provide a basic overview on several key areas, it would be unrealistic to include everything that has ever been written on the subject of homosexuality and the scriptures. While some brief highlights can be covered here, it is strongly recommended that you read some of the books and articles listed in the Resources section of this guide for further study.

Three out of the four standard works of the Church (the Book of Mormon, Doctrine and Covenants and the Pearl of Great Price) don't mention homosexuality at all or even hint about the subject. It is also interesting to note that when Joseph Smith organized nearly every aspect of the Church as we know it today, he never mentioned homosexuality. The only volume of scripture that refers to homosexuality is the Bible. A Presbyterian publication comments on the biblical references to homosexuality this way:

Most people who use the Bible to condemn homosexual people rely on a literal interpretation of the Scriptures. This literal interpretation is very selective: passages which call for the stoning of unruly children or death for all women who are not virgins on their wedding day or giving away all one's belongings to follow Christ are usually not taken literally. The [first five books of the bible] contains 613 commandments, hundreds of which contemporary Jews and Christians no longer follow because they reflect the limited knowledge and understanding available thousands of years ago."<sup>4</sup>

Another respected biblical scholar summarizes this topic:

Given the appeal to the Bible in the case of homosexuality, one would assume that the Bible has much to say on the subject. It has not. The subject of homosexuality is not mentioned in the Ten Commandments, or in the Summary of the Law. No prophet discourses on the subject. Jesus himself makes no mention of it, and homosexuality does not appear to be of much concern to those early churches with which Saint Paul and his successors were involved."<sup>5</sup>

The biblical writers have never contemplated a form of homosexuality in which loving, monogamous and faithful persons sought to live the implications of the gospel with as much fidelity to it as any heterosexual believer. All they knew of homosexuality was prostitution, pederasty, lasciviousness and exploitation. These vices, as we know, are not unknown among heterosexuals, and to define contemporary heterosexuals only in these terms is a cultural slander of the highest order.<sup>6</sup>

For more specific information on the biblical passages that **do** refer to homosexuality, including Sodom and Gomorrah, the Holiness Code from Leviticus and the teachings of Paul, please check out some of the wonderful books and articles listed in the Resource section of this booklet. You will probably learn some things you hadn't even thought of.

## Word of Wisdom and Tithing

Some gay Mormons experience a change in their practices and beliefs of Mormonism including the Word of Wisdom and tithing. This can be for a variety of reasons. It could be because these people never fully supported or believed in these practices, even when they were members of the Church. It could also be because people's doctrinal views and opinions change over time. For example, a person may come to the conclusion after study, that the Word of Wisdom never was intended as a commandment, but only as a suggestion from God. Another reason could be that a person is simply trying to separate himself/herself from the Church as much as possible as a result of negative experiences as a member of the Church.

The Word of Wisdom also contains teachings which are not unique to Mormonism. Some of these teachings are considered simple common sense health advice, even among non-religious people. For example, you'll learn in any public health education class about the dangers of abusing illegal drugs. You'll also learn how smoking can be an absolute detriment to your health. In fact, both recreational drugs and tobacco can kill you. So for many people, no matter what affiliation they have with the Church, the choice to not smoke or use illegal drugs is not a matter of religious or spiritual choice, but rather one based solely on maintaining physical wellness.



Other gay Mormons decide to continue with these practices whether they remain active Church members or not. For them, these practices are something they feel strongly about, and they wish to continue with them. Some gay Mormons decide to pay tithing to other charities instead of to the Church. This is often because they feel upset that the Church has used its funds in the past for anti-gay legislation in some parts of the country.<sup>7</sup> It is important to note, however, even if a person desires to pay tithing to the Church, their payment could be rejected. For example, if a person is excommunicated or decides to leave the Church, the Church will not accept a person's tithing.

Whether you or not you remain an active Church member, the decision to continue with these practices is something only you can decide. This topic, like many others in this booklet, is one that requires deep thought and consideration.



## Church Schools

Gaining a formal education, in most cases, is necessary for us to be able to provide for ourselves and those we care for. Some young adults choose to attend privately owned schools that are owned and operated by the Church. While these schools may be excellent institutions of learning, they can present unique challenges and difficulties for those who are attracted to the same sex.

If you are attending or are planning to attend one of the Church-owned schools, there are several things to consider. The most important of these is understanding that you will be required to agree to live by a code of conduct (usually called the "Honor Code") while attending any of these schools. All Church schools have specific regulations which forbid any type of homosexual conduct. Vague terminology in these rules has made it difficult to determine exactly what "homosexual conduct" means. In fact, there have been documented instances where students have been expelled from a Church university for activities as innocent as watching gay-themed television shows.<sup>8</sup>

As intelligent beings, we experience mental growth and often modify our opinions and views as we grow. Even if you are willing to abide by the Honor Code when you first enroll in a Church school, your opinions and ideas may change after a few semesters or even after a few years at a Church school. After time, you may feel trapped, and your willingness to support or keep the Honor Code may change. Before committing to the Honor Code, make sure you have a back-up plan in place in the event that your situation or opinions change.

If you decide to attend a Church school and remain quiet about your sexual identity, you still may not feel very welcome. For example, a former President of BYU went so far as to ask students to leave the university completely if they were dealing with issues of same gender attraction, regardless of whether they had been involved in any type of "homosexual conduct."<sup>9</sup>

Church-owned schools can provide some of the finest educational experiences in the country. However, they may not be the best choice for students who are gay, lesbian, or bisexual even when sexual identity is hidden. As most vocational counselors will tell you, there are hundreds of other excellent universities and colleges throughout the world. Don't limit yourself by thinking that you have to attend a Church school. If you are experiencing extreme pressure from your family or friends to attend a Church school, consider speaking with the counselor of the non-Church school you wish to attend. These counselors have most likely run into this situation before and can offer some great advice.

## Family

Deciding when to tell your parents or family members about your attraction to the same sex is something that no one can decide for you. Be very careful about taking advice from someone who tells you when and where you should "come out" to your parents. No one understands your family life or your relationship with your family better than you. However, you shouldn't feel like you have to handle family issues by yourself. In fact, it is strongly recommended that you seek out help and suggestions from counselors, other parents who have gay children, or other people who have had the experience of "coming out" to their family. There are also

several books that have been written on this subject that you could read that provide excellent suggestions and support (check out the Resources section at the back of this booklet).

If your family is aware of your situation and are quick to anger and slow to understand what you are going through, be patient with them. Remember that you have had your entire lifetime to adjust and learn how to deal with your sexual identity, but your family is probably new to learning how to cope with this issue. Establishing lines of communication and building bridges of understanding are absolutely essential elements when it comes to family issues.



PFLAG (Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays) or Family Fellowship (an organization similar to PFLAG with an LDS theme) can provide many excellent resources for parents and family members who are having a hard time coping with issues associated with having a gay or lesbian family member. Be sure to let your family know that they are not alone and that there are others who they can talk to, share frustrations with, and ask advice from. If they aren't comfortable visiting with other families, offer the option of family counseling with a therapist who is unbiased and professional regarding gay issues. If that's not an option, share other resources with them, such as books and videos. The most important thing is to work together to build a bridge of understanding. You don't need to adopt your parents' views into your life, and they don't need to adopt your opinions. However, it is

important that you each make an effort to understand each other and to continue to show your love for each other.

Under no circumstances is physical, mental, or emotional abuse something that anyone should experience. If you are being abused in any way, if you are unsure if what you have experienced could be termed as abuse, or if you have been forced to move out from your home, contact your local youth shelter for help. They are there to help and can provide you with many resources. Never "run away" from home, especially to travel to an unknown city or state. You may be risking your life in the process. Even if you need to leave your home and stay with a friend or family member for a while, be sure to let your family know that you are safe and have a place to stay. Failing to do so could cause lots of problems with police and law enforcement agencies. If you are under legal age (in most states this is age 18) and you are not able to live at home any longer, either by your choice or the choice of your parents, please refer to the Resources section for of this booklet for places you can contact for specific information and advice.

## **Friends**

Regardless of your sexual identity, having good friends is important. Choose friends that can support you, no matter what your opinions, views, or choices may be. Be careful about associating with people that want you to change who you are, just so you will fit in to their social circles. True friends should accept you and love you for who you are, even if you have different viewpoints or beliefs. They should also motivate you and uplift you, not put you down.

Not only is it important for you to choose friends that can accept you for who you are, you

should also be willing to accept the life choices of others as they exercise their own agency. This doesn't mean you have to be best friends with everyone you meet. However, it does mean that you shouldn't rush to judge someone just because their life choices are different than your own. Doing so could result in the exclusion of some very wonderful people in your life.

It is very natural to want to surround yourself with people who have a background similar to your own. There are many gay and lesbian people who are or have been members of the Church. Building friendships with these people can be priceless, because they have actually walked the same path that you are walking. Be aware however, that some of these people may have very unkind feelings toward the Church and its leaders. These people may have had very difficult experiences with the Church in regard to their homosexuality, which have caused them to become very angry or hurt. Opinions relating to homosexuality and the Church are just as varied among gay and lesbian Mormons as they are within the general membership of the Church. Be kind and respectful of other people's opinions as you socialize with them. Do not be afraid to speak up and share your views as you feel it is appropriate, but try to put energy into actively listening to what other people have to say. As you actively listen, it will be easier for you to see another person's point of view, and you may actually learn something new!



### **Depression & Counseling**



Depression is a challenge all by itself, regardless of sexual orientation. If you have feelings of hopelessness, extreme sadness, or even suicide, take advantage of the many services your community or mental health center can offer. In many cases, private and confidential short-term counseling can be available to you free of charge through your school or community center. If you have a job, your work place may also offer free therapy through an Employee Assistance Program and counseling may be covered under your health insurance program. Ask your Human Resources department for details. If you don't have a job or your own insurance, there are still options for you through community mental health organizations (see Resources & Information section). Some middle school and high school counselors can be very wonderful, however sometimes it's hard to distinguish what type of counselor your school has to offer. For example, some schools only have counselors who have been trained in career and educational guidance. While these counselors may be better than nothing at all, be aware that they might not be trained to handle sensitive issues such as depression. Seek out counselors that have experience with this. Look for titles such as "LCSW" which stands for Licensed Clinical Social Worker.

The biggest challenge when looking for a counselor whether at a school, university, or in private practice, is finding someone that can provide professional services without being biased or letting their own opinions about homosexuality influence a counseling session. Even though it may take some looking, there are therapists and counselors who are unbiased and will not push you to make choices you don't want to make. Don't be afraid to call a therapist or counselor first and ask them about their experience in counseling gay and lesbian clients. If you aren't happy with your counselor after the first few sessions, move on and look for someone else. Finding the right counselor or therapist can make a world of difference in

helping deal with your challenges with depression.

If you need immediate help, there is an organization you can contact at anytime. Call the Trevor Helpline at 866-488-7386 or 866-4-U-TREVOR. The Trevor Helpline is available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week and is especially for gay youth and young adults.

### **Evergreen, Pilgrimage & Change Therapy**

Evergreen International is an organization which claims to help members of the Church to "overcome" their homosexuality. Pilgrimage is an organization associated with Evergreen, but is specifically intended for young adults.

Evergreen has been summarized quite accurately in these words:

"Some people who have participated in Evergreen, but who have since left [the organization], say that Evergreen was a positive experience in the sense that it gave them a place where they could first begin to talk about sexual orientation and come to terms with their [homosexuality]. Other gay Mormons are convinced that Evergreen is dangerous because it offers false hope and false teachings about sexual orientation. Some gay Mormons even believe Evergreen to be hypocritical and deceptive."<sup>10</sup>

The entire basis of Evergreen rests upon the hope that a person's homosexuality can be overcome. This attempt at overcoming one's sexual orientation is sometimes referred to as reparative, conversion, or change therapy. All major mental health and medical professionals (including the American Academy of Pediatrics, the American Psychological Association, the American Psychiatric Association, the American Counseling Association and the National Association of Social Workers) have stated that a person can not change his/her sexual orientation and that any attempt to do so can actually be harmful to a person's mental health and well being.<sup>11</sup> In addition, a recent study by a licensed clinical social worker and several university professors (including one from BYU) concluded that change therapy simply does not work.<sup>12</sup>

This guide, therefore, does not recommend or endorse participation in Evergreen or any type of change therapy. The few positive benefits that can be gained from participation in Evergreen support groups such as friendship, acceptance, and education can be found equally in other gay support groups. It is recommended that you seek out gay and lesbian support groups whose motives are simply to provide support and guidance. Many of these support groups will do their very best to understand respect your religious convictions and beliefs. There may even be support groups in your area specifically for those who come from an LDS, Christian or other religious background. Before attending, do your homework by finding out and making sure that the group doesn't endorse reparative or change therapy.

### **Entertainment and the Media**

The media is constantly sending us messages about who we should be, what we should look like, and how we should act. Most recently, the entertainment and media industry has found that targeting a gay and lesbian audience can bring them lots of money.<sup>13</sup> Be aware that the

people who run the media and entertainment industry are not interested in you as a person, or your self-esteem. Their only motivation is to make money. This is especially true with media that tries to send messages about what they think "looks good".

We all know that what we see on TV and magazines is not usually reality. However sometimes we get so absorbed in what the media presents, that it's very easy to forget this fact. It's so easy to fall into the temptation of comparing ourselves to an image or person that simply isn't real. We all know that photos are often airbrushed and movies are very often digitally enhanced or changed, yet we still find ourselves feeling inadequate because we might not match up to what the media tells us we should be. We are all different and beautiful in our own individual ways. Don't let the media hypnotize you into thinking that you need to dress or look a certain way in order to be accepted by others. Don't let those who have already been "hypnotized" by the media drag you down either. Establish your own identity and be yourself.

The media can also be very effective at telling us how we should act, react and feel about certain things. The media has been notorious for portraying certain groups of people in a very stereotypical way. This is especially true about gay and lesbian people and other minorities. This is unfortunate because not only does it misrepresent to the general public who gay and lesbian people really are, but it also makes it confusing for those who are just coming to terms with their own sexual identity. It's quite easy to feel confused when you can't identify with the gay and lesbian characters you see portrayed in movies and TV. Again, it may be obvious, but we need to be reminded that not all gay and lesbian people are like the characters on programs such as *Will & Grace* or *Queer As Folk*. If you don't feel you "fit in" with the characters on these and other programs, don't worry! It's most likely a good thing that you aren't like a character on TV!

### **The Internet**



The internet is probably the most popular way for gay and lesbian people to meet one another and also to obtain information about homosexuality. The internet is especially helpful for those people who are not yet comfortable with their sexual orientation, because it provides a way for them to "chat" with other gay people anonymously. While chatting anonymously can be a positive thing for many people, it can also cause very serious problems. Some people you chat with online may pretend to be someone that they are not. In other cases, people will not intentionally try to deceive you, but they may not quite be the type of person in real life that you expected them to be. The most serious problem occurs when someone uses a chat room to lure others into some very dangerous situations. For example, there have been cases where certain persons who strongly dislike gay people will go into a gay chat room trying to lure a gay person into a situation where he/she could be physically assaulted. These cases are quite rare, but they can and do happen.

If you choose to meet someone from a chat room or an online personals ad, you should always take several precautions:

- Always meet in a high-traffic public location (like a restaurant, mall, coffee shop, or bookstore).
- Never reveal personal information such as your address, job specifics, etc.

- Tell a friend or room-mate that you are planning to meet someone from online. Tell him/her where you will be meeting and what time you expect to return home.
- Provide your own transportation so that you can leave at any time.
- Trust your feelings. If something doesn't seem right, leave the situation immediately.

Generally speaking, you shouldn't be afraid of using the internet to meet people. If you use common sense, take precautions, and follow your instincts, meeting people online can be a very positive experience.

Remember that using the internet is becoming less of a "private" or "anonymous" experience. You need to be aware that your internet usage on shared computers can be easily tracked, recorded and monitored. For example, if you are using a shared computer at home or at work, your parents or your supervisors may be able to view what websites you have accessed even if you erase your internet browser history. Another example is that many large corporations have the ability to view their employees computer screens live (real-time) from a remote monitoring station. Unless you have **your own computer** that is password protected, you may want to consider using a public computer at a library or computer lab. With the exception of Church schools, most public libraries or school computer labs could care less if you are reading about things of a gay or lesbian theme (as long as it is not pornographic or sexually explicit). In most cases, you need not be afraid that a librarian is going to approach you and ask you why you are reading about being gay and Mormon. As long as you are not reading or displaying explicit material, and as long as you aren't breaking the facility's internet policy, it's really none of their business what you read. In fact, some libraries will even let you visit gay chat rooms during your usage time. The most important thing to remember is that no matter where you are or what computer you use, you will undoubtedly leave cyber footprints on the computer which you use to access the internet, even if you think you've erased the internet usage history files on the computer.

## Dance Clubs



Gay and lesbian people usually are not able to socialize with each other in large numbers throughout the week as straight people do. For this reason, many often choose to enjoy the company of other gay and lesbian people in dance clubs which host gay-themed nights on the weekends. However, some choose not to visit dance clubs because they don't enjoy the environment there. Just like activities in your regular daily life, your experience at a dance club will be what you make it. For example, many people choose to drink alcohol while at a dance club and they may pressure you to do the same. If you don't want to drink, be polite but firm in your decision not to drink. Be aware that drugs are also quite common place in dance clubs and bars.

If you are under 21, you most likely won't be allowed entrance into some dance clubs. However, some places do have alcohol-free areas where those under 21 can dance and socialize. Not only are there rules for who is allowed to enter, but sometimes there are dress codes as well. Before you go, you may want to find out what the club rules are in order to save you some embarrassment of being turned away at the door. If you are over 21 and choose to drink alcohol, do so responsibly. Under no circumstances should you ever drive after you've been drinking. This is especially true if you are not experienced in knowing how your body reacts to alcohol. You should also never get into a car when the driver has been

drinking or using drugs. If you need to, take a cab. The cost of a cab is far less than that of losing your own life in an automobile accident. This may seem like a lecture from a junior high health class, but you would be surprised at how many grown, professional adults forget this very simple advice.

If you have never been to a gay dance club before, be sure you attend with friends for your first visit. Going alone for your first time can be quite overwhelming.

## Dating

The motivation and purpose of dating can be very different for each person. If you have decided that you want to start dating people of the same gender, the most important thing is to first identify what your purpose in dating will be. Dating without having any purpose or intention can lead to hurt feelings and broken hearts on both sides. You may decide to date to find a potential same-sex partner for a long term relationship. You may date just to get to know how gay and lesbian relationships work. You also may date to socialize and get to know other people. All of these (and many more) are perfectly healthy reasons for dating. If you aren't sure what your purpose for dating is, you may not be ready to start dating.

When you do decide what your purpose for dating is, be sure to communicate it to those people that you date. This doesn't mean that you should tell someone that you are looking for a life partner or spouse on your first date, but be careful not to mislead anyone or lead them to believe that you want something that you really don't.

In most ways, dating someone of the same gender is just like dating someone of the opposite sex. Communication, honesty and trust are all important in dating no matter what your sexual orientation may be. However, unlike heterosexual dating, there really isn't any form of etiquette for gay or lesbian dating. There aren't any unwritten rules about who should buy dinner or who should open the door at the restaurant. This can be awkward at first, but it can also be a wonderful opportunity to find out about the way your date interacts with other people and how he or she acts in certain situations.



## Heterosexual Marriage

Those who consider themselves bisexual may date people of both sexes and one day may choose to marry someone of the opposite sex. Ideally, the bisexual person in the relationship should communicate to his/her partner about his/her sexuality and sexual preferences early on in the relationship. If you consider yourself bisexual, you should never ask someone to marry you if you haven't been honest with your partner about your bisexuality. To do so would be unfair to your partner and to yourself. Building a relationship on this kind of dishonesty is not only unhealthy, but it could also result in an early end of your marriage.



Likewise, if you know that you are sexually attracted **only** to members of the same sex, marriage to a person of the opposite sex should be avoided except in the most rare cases. A marriage in this situation should only be considered after much thought and prayer. It is crucial that both partners be made aware of the situation before vows are exchanged and given ample time to consider the likely challenges and heavy strains this will cause for their future marriage. Pre-marital

counseling from a non-biased third party is strongly suggested. Meeting other men and women who have actually experienced the challenges of homosexuality or bisexuality in a heterosexual marriage would also be very advantageous. Gamofites, for example, is an organization comprised of gay Mormon fathers and has countless available resources not only in print, but in a person-to-person setting as well. Church leaders have also given very wonderful advice regarding this matter. President Gordon B. Hinckley has advised that marriage to the opposite sex should never be used as a means of trying to diminish your attractions to the same sex.<sup>14</sup>

Relationship issues relating to bisexuality or homosexuality within heterosexual marriage can be very complex and difficult to handle. If you are having difficulty dealing with these relationship issues, don't be afraid to seek professional advice from marriage and family counselors who are trained in helping people in these situations.

## Sexuality

One of the most common misconceptions that exists about gay people, and especially about gay men, is that every interaction they have with others of the same sex is motivated by desire for sexual activity. As most gay people will tell you, this is simply not true. Sexuality and intimacy are the same for gay people as they are for straight people. The only difference is that gay and lesbian people experience the feelings of attraction and desire for emotional intimacy with the same sex. Most gays and lesbians want to meet that perfect person, fall in love, and live happily ever after just as straight people do.



Just like straight people, gays and lesbians also exhibit varying degrees of attitudes and opinions about sex. There are both straight and gay people who have no desire for long term commitment, and find satisfaction only through sexual activity. On the opposite end of the spectrum, there exist both straight and gay people who decide not to ever participate in sexual activity and declare themselves celibate. An important thing to remember regarding our sexuality is that we all have different needs, desires and motivations. Each person's sexuality is a personal and private matter. No one has the right to pass judgment on another person's sexual practices. Nor does anyone have the right to tell you how you should or shouldn't express yourself sexually (unless of course you are breaking the law or harming another person in the process).

Your attitude and views about your own sexual practices will be something that you will need to decide for yourself. You are the only one who can decide what your boundaries and limitations will be. Since you are a young adult, don't be surprised if you find that your attitudes and opinions about sexuality change over time. There is nothing wrong with this. Young adulthood is the time when most human beings explore and establish their set of beliefs about sex.

Keep in mind however, that exploring your sexuality **does not** require having experimental or even promiscuous sex. For example, you can explore your sexuality by reading books on the subjects of human sexuality, sex and religion, and the history of sex. You can also explore your own sexuality by discussing with other people what their own views and opinions are. As you learn about your own sexual self, be sure to keep an open mind. Sexuality is not something that can be explored freely while holding on to preconceived ideas. You don't have to accept or believe the things you'll learn in your exploration, but be open to new ideas and be careful about passing judgment on those whose sexual practices you may not agree with.

Deciding to actually participate in sexual activity should come only after you have given yourself a good education of the subject. It should also happen only after you have taken the time to ponder what sexual activity would do for you and what it will not do for you. Think about how sexual activity will affect all aspects of your life. These are all questions that you can't answer in the moments after someone makes a sexual advance toward you, when you are trying to decide how to proceed. These are things that need to be considered well in advance of any possible sexual encounter.

If in your exploration of sexuality, you decide to participate in sexual activity, educate yourself first about safe sex practices. To reduce the risk of the transmission of the virus that causes AIDS (HIV), as well as other sexually transmitted diseases, learn how to use a condom or latex barrier. **Always** use a condom (or latex barrier) for oral sex (mouth to genitals), vaginal sex (penetration of the vagina), or anal sex (penetration of the anus). Never use any type of oil-based lubrication with a latex condom. Condoms are available in many places for no cost, such as family planning clinics. Your school health nurse may even have some for you. Condoms can also be purchased at any drug store or ordered via the internet to avoid embarrassment. There is no age restriction on the purchase of condoms, so you won't need to show your ID or get your parent's permission to buy them.

Remember that there are many ways to participate in sexual activity that don't require oral, vaginal or anal sex. Kissing, rubbing on each other while clothed (sometimes called "dry humping" or "dry sex") or masturbating each other are activities that are considered quite safe and have a lower risk of transmitting sexual diseases.

It's quite common for gay and lesbian Mormon youth to participate in some type of sexual activity and then immediately afterwards feel an overwhelming sense of guilt and shame. This guilt and shame can come about for many reasons. One person may feel guilty because he has just done something which he has been taught not to do, even without understanding why he was told not to do it. Another person may feel shame because she may not be considered "worthy" in the eyes of the Church. For a variety of reasons, this person may then involve themselves in additional sexual activity which results in more guilt and shame. This is a very uncomfortable and frustrating cycle to find yourself in. It usually happens when a person thinks he or she is ready to be involved sexually with someone else, when in actuality the person is far from ready. The cycle can also start when someone finds themselves in a situation that they didn't expect to be in. When you're in the heat of the moment, things can happen very quickly and the situation may end with something you didn't expect to have happen. If you find yourself in this frustrating cycle, realize that doing something sexual with another person doesn't mean it's the end of the world. Even if you are active in the Church and wish to remain so, life will go on. We are human beings and human beings are sexual beings. God created us this way, so even He understands that humans will be sexual, even at times when they don't expect to be. Regardless of the reason, remember that guilt and

shame are useless emotions. It's ok to learn from your experience, but it's pointless to shame yourself. Don't drown yourself in your own sea of guilt.

You also need to be aware that sex can carry with it some very powerful emotions. Humans are not like most other animals. Very rarely can we have sex and not have it impact us in some way, no matter how small. If you have never experienced sexual activity with another person, be prepared to have feelings about yourself and about your sex partner that you may not have expected to have. For example, you may enter a sexual situation thinking that it will only be about sex and nothing more. During sex and even after you've had sex, you may be surprised to find an overwhelming attraction or connection to your sex partner. Your sex partner may even feel this toward you, even if this wasn't your intention at the beginning of the encounter. In another example, you may be very romantically interested in your sex partner, however he/she may be only interested in you for a recreational sexual experience. You must be prepared to handle your own feelings, your partners feelings, as well as situations that may occur after having sex.

After a sexual encounter, reexamine your feelings about your own sexuality. If you weren't ready for what happened, that's perfectly acceptable! We all travel different paths in life and at different speeds. Don't rush yourself, especially with sex. If you truly aren't ready for sexual activity with someone, be very careful to not allow yourself to get into a similar situation again until you are absolutely sure you are ready. Finally, talk to other gay Mormons for support and advice. As with most every topic in this booklet, many gay Mormons have experienced the same feelings you are going through.

## **Values**

While each of us may have very different opinions about doctrine, policy, or practices, no one can argue that membership in the Church can provide a person with great opportunities to learn some very important principles. As members of the Church, we have been taught about the importance of honesty, hard work, integrity, and discipline, just to name a few.

For a variety of reasons, some gay Mormons decide to leave the Church or they may be removed from Church membership. Sometimes because of anger or sadness about this, a person may leave behind almost anything that has anything to do with the Church in their minds. Unfortunately, this sometimes includes abandoning some very valuable truths, many of which aren't even specifically Mormon. If you decide to leave the Church or have been removed from Church membership, remember that no matter where your life leads you, don't move from one stepping stone to another without taking with you the important lessons and values that you have learned along the way.

## **Service to Others**

Being of service to others is one of the values that we learn from being members of Church. However, this is a value that is not unique to Mormonism. It is something that we should always remember to incorporate into our lives. Being a gay Mormon, you have a unique opportunity to be of great service to other gay Mormons. As you know from experience, being gay and Mormon is not the easiest thing to deal with. There are many gay Mormon youth who also feel very confused and alone and could use your help and guidance.



Consider volunteering for gay Mormon organizations, so that you can help other youth and young adults realize that they aren't alone and that there are people who truly care about them. If you aren't comfortable volunteering for these organizations, you can do many other things to be of service to gay Mormon youth. For example, be ready and willing to talk to others about your experiences when asked. If you see a post to an internet message board or group from someone who is just beginning to deal with his or her sexual orientation, send that person an e-mail letting him or her know that you would be happy to answer any questions he or she may have. Often times many confused youth and young adults visit gay chat rooms, hoping to find someone that will understand. If you spot one of these people while you are visiting a gay chat room, say hello and offer your online friendship.

Finally, one of the most powerful ways you can be of service to other gay Mormons is to be proactive in discouraging hurtful comments about gay and lesbian people at church, work, or school. This happens most often because people have been misinformed about something or they simply don't understand. Speaking up to reeducate them or remind them to be respectful of others can be very difficult and takes a lot of courage! However, doing so can have the most powerful and lasting effects in the minds of those with whom you associate.

## The Way Forward

Finally accepting the fact that you are gay or lesbian can be one of the most stress-relieving and freeing experiences that you will ever have. No longer do you have to wonder why you feel a certain way toward the same sex. No longer do you need to fight the war of feelings every day. You finally know who you are and why you feel the way you do. The next task is deciding what you will do with this "new" you.



One of the most important pieces of advice that can be given to gay youth and young adults is to slow down and simply take your time. Don't rush your own "coming out" experience. It can be such a relief to finally figure out who you are, that you may find yourself pushing things faster than you may be ready to handle. Take time to figure out how your sexual orientation will affect your daily life. Use this new stepping stone in your life to set new goals and then carry them out. Give your goals priorities, putting first what is the most immediate and important for you to accomplish. Some of these goals may be related to your being gay or lesbian, and some may not.

Whether or not you are experiencing depression, a counselor or therapist can be of great help in helping you pace your life, set goals, and create the type of life you want to live.

Above all, remember that you are in control. This is **your** life. You have the freedom to make it the life you want it to be.

## Resources & Information

### Suggestions for Those Under Legal Age

Not being of legal age can have its own unique challenges when dealing with being gay and Mormon. Since people who are under the age that the law considers to be an "adult", the ability to handle certain situations without parental involvement can be challenging. The purpose of this section is to provide some basic advice to those under legal age.

Finding a trusted adult to talk to about being gay and Mormon is extremely important. However, finding an unbiased person on your own with whom you can trust can be extraordinarily challenging. When trying to find an adult in whom you can confide, remember to "think outside the box". Consider all of the adults you know. Try to think of adults such as teachers, co-workers, advisers, coaches or trainers, tutors. If you can't seem to find a trusted, non-biased adult that you can speak with, try finding a professional counselor. Call a local mental health clinic and explain your situation. Let them know that you are in need of speaking with a counselor or therapist, but that you are a minor. They will let you know what you need to do to proceed.

If your parent or guardian is already aware of the issues about your sexual orientation, he or she may want you to see a counselor. Counseling may be provided by Church resources. If this is the case, be sure to have a discussion with your counselor before your sessions begin to outline what things are confidential and what things he will be allowed to communicate to your parents. Also discuss what your goals are for the counseling session. If your parents have requested that your counselor undergo "reparative therapy" with you to attempt to re-orient your sexuality and this is not something that you want to have happen, be sure to make this known to your therapist. As an alternative, you can use the counseling sessions to talk about other issues that you may want to discuss (such as school life, career, family relationships, etc.).

### **Transgender and Transsexual Issues**

Transgender and transsexual issues are not covered in this booklet. In fact, an entirely separate booklet would be required to cover these important subjects. It is hoped that future editions of this booklet will cover these topics. For the time being, please consult your local library for more information on these topics. Visit the transgender area of the Affirmation website at [www.affirmation.org/transgender](http://www.affirmation.org/transgender). You may also find a great deal of information on the internet by searching for "transgender Mormons" or "transsexual Mormons".

## **Resources**

### **Physical Needs**

Sexually Transmitted Diseases

[www.plannedparenthood.org](http://www.plannedparenthood.org)

Up-to-date information about how to protect yourself from sexually transmitted infections (formerly called sexually transmitted diseases or STDs)

### **Emotional Needs**

The Trevor Helpline

[www.thetrevorproject.org](http://www.thetrevorproject.org)

If you are thinking about suicide or just feeling down and need someone to talk to, call the

Trevor Hotline 24 hours a day, 7 days a week at 866-4-U-TREVOR or 866-488-7386. The Trevor Helpline is for gay/lesbian/questioning youth. It's a toll free, which means it's free and no evidence that you made the call will show up on the phone bill. Confidentiality is a top priority. The counselors at the helpline are trained to deal with any kind of crisis. All are trained in gay and lesbian/confused/questioning and coming out issues; all are non-judgmental and they will not make any judgments on you regardless of how you identify your sexuality or even if you can't identify it.

Crisis Intervention Center [USA]  
1-800-999-9999

London Lesbian & Gay Switchboard [UK]  
020-7837-7324

## **Spiritual Needs**

### *LDS THEMED RELIGIOUS/SPIRITUAL ORGANIZATIONS*

LDS Reconciliation  
[www.ldsreconciliation.org](http://www.ldsreconciliation.org)

New Order Mormons  
[www.newordermormon.org](http://www.newordermormon.org)

Reform Mormonism  
[www.reformmormonism.org](http://www.reformmormonism.org)

Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Community of Christ)  
[www.cofchrist.org](http://www.cofchrist.org)

Restoration Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints  
[www.rcjc.org](http://www.rcjc.org)

### *NON-LDS CHURCHES*

Cathedral of Hope  
[www.cathedralofhope.com](http://www.cathedralofhope.com)

Church of Religious Science  
[www.spirituallyfree.org](http://www.spirituallyfree.org)

Disciples of Christ  
[www.gladalliance.org](http://www.gladalliance.org)

Episcopal Church In The United States [Gay issues are a hotly contested topic right now in the Episcopal Church. Please be aware that some congregations are more gay welcoming than others.]  
<http://ecusa.anglican.org>

Metropolitan Community Church  
[www.mccchurch.org](http://www.mccchurch.org)

Quakers (Society of Friends)  
[www.quaker.org/flgbtqc](http://www.quaker.org/flgbtqc)

Unitarian Universalist  
[www.uua.org](http://www.uua.org)

United Church of Christ  
[www.ucc.org](http://www.ucc.org)

### *SPIRITUAL ORGANIZATIONS (NON RELIGIOUS)*

Ancient Mystical Order Rosae Crucis (AMORC)  
[www.rosicrucian.org](http://www.rosicrucian.org)

Builders of the Adytum  
[www.bota.org](http://www.bota.org)

The Order of Bards Ovates and Druids  
[www.druidry.org](http://www.druidry.org)

Theosophical Society in America  
[www.theosophical.org](http://www.theosophical.org)

### *POLICIES & TEACHINGS ABOUT HOMOSEXUALITY AMONG VARIOUS RELIGIOUS ORGANIZATIONS*

Policies Of 45 Christian Denominations On Homosexuality  
[www.religioustolerance.org/hom\\_chur2.htm](http://www.religioustolerance.org/hom_chur2.htm)

Policies & Teachings About Homosexuality In Judaism  
[www.religioustolerance.org/hom\\_judaism.htm](http://www.religioustolerance.org/hom_judaism.htm)

Policies & Teachings About Homosexuality in Non-Judeo-Christian Religions  
[www.religioustolerance.org/hom\\_chur3.htm](http://www.religioustolerance.org/hom_chur3.htm)

### *OTHER WEBSITES OF INTEREST*

Bridges Across the Divide  
[www.bridges-across.org](http://www.bridges-across.org)  
"cyberspace initiative providing models and resources for building respectful relationships across the divide among those who disagree about sexual orientation and gender identity."

What We Wish We Had Known  
[http://www.pcmk.org/Blue\\_Book\\_V5.pdf](http://www.pcmk.org/Blue_Book_V5.pdf)  
An online book written by a Presbyterian congregation. This book has common questions and

answers about issues associated with homosexuality and religion. Not just for Presbyterians, but people of all faiths.

## **Gay Mormon Organizations & Other Support Groups**

Affirmation: Gay & Lesbian Mormons

[www.affirmation.org](http://www.affirmation.org)

The official web site for Affirmation: Gay & Lesbian Mormons. "Affirmation serves the needs of gays, lesbians, bisexual LDS and their supportive family and friends through social and educational activities."

Ex-Mormon

[www.exmormon.org](http://www.exmormon.org)

An online informational support for those who are questioning their faith in the Mormon Church and for those who need support in the transition from membership in the Church. The organization does not advocate or affiliate with any particular religion.

Family Fellowship

[www.ldsfamilyfellowship.org](http://www.ldsfamilyfellowship.org)

Family Fellowship is "a volunteer service organization, a diverse collection of Mormon families engaged in the cause of strengthening families with homosexual members."

Gamofites - Gay Mormon Fathers

[www.gamofites.org](http://www.gamofites.org)

"Men united in the joys and challenges of being fathers, Gay, and Mormon. We are dedicated to fostering and supporting the needs and individual growth of members in an environment of confidentiality, trust, and unconditional love."

Gay and Lesbian Acceptance

[www.galaweb.org](http://www.galaweb.org)

"GALA is an association of gay, lesbian, bisexual and straight persons, their families and friends of the Community of Christ (formerly the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints) faith community."

GayLDS (website only)

[www.gaylds.com](http://www.gaylds.com)

"We hope to be able to provide you with a resource for; finding social interaction, to help you understand yourself, and to help you find your understanding what it may mean to you to be LDS and Gay."

GLYA World

[www.glyaworld.wordpress.com](http://www.glyaworld.wordpress.com)

Resources for gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender LDS young adults

GayMormon (website only)

[www.gaymormon.com](http://www.gaymormon.com)

Loaded with information about everything related to being gay and Mormon. This site includes information on doctrine, policy, case studies, advice, and resources.

Gay Mormon Stories

[www.gaymormonstories.com](http://www.gaymormonstories.com)

A website to provide a forum for gay men, lesbians and their families and friends to share their stories. The common denominator is Mormonism with the hope that those who are journeying therein will feel less alone after reading these stories.

Gay RMs

[www.gayrms.com](http://www.gayrms.com)

A social group in Salt Lake for gay returned missionaries.

## **Student & University Organizations**

DLSU

[organizations.weber.edu/dlsu](http://organizations.weber.edu/dlsu)

Delta Lambda Sappho Union at Weber State University

LGSU

[www.utah.edu/lgsu](http://www.utah.edu/lgsu)

Lesbian and Gay Student Union at the University of Utah

Gay Student Center

[gaystudentcenter.studentcenter.org](http://gaystudentcenter.studentcenter.org)

Website for gay students in the USA

## **Youth Organizations & Websites**

Just the Facts About Sexual Orientation and Youth

[www.apa.org/pi/lgbc/publications/justthefacts.html](http://www.apa.org/pi/lgbc/publications/justthefacts.html)

Wonderful article produced by the American Psychological Association and endorsed by over 10 other professional associations.

Mogenic

[www.mogenic.com](http://www.mogenic.com)

Cool place for support, resources and fun for gay youth

Out Proud

[www.outproud.org](http://www.outproud.org)

One of the best internet resource pages for youth

Youth Guardian

[www.youth-guard.org](http://www.youth-guard.org)

A site run by gay youth, giving support via the internet to gay/questioning youth.

Youth Resource

[www.youthresource.com](http://www.youthresource.com)

Search for gay youth resources in your area! Plus, the website is full of resources on health, sexuality, community, and lives of gay youth.

## **Magazines**

YGA Magazine  
www.ygamag.com

XY Magazine  
www.xy.com

Oasis Magazine  
www.oasismag.com

## More Resources

Gay LDS Young Adults - GLYA  
www.glya.com

Provide[s] resources and information for the physical, mental/emotional, spiritual and educational well-being of Gay LDS Young Adults throughout the world.

## Endnotes

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## About the Author



Aaron Cloward was raised in the small Mormon community of Mt. Pleasant, Utah. In high school he was actively involved in student government as well as Church leadership. He served on his high school LDS Seminary Council as a youth presenter and speaker in several area Stakes.

From 1995-97, Aaron's church involvement and leadership continued into his full-time missionary service in the California Ventura mission. Upon returning from his mission Aaron attended Dixie College in St. George, Utah where he fulfilled other church leadership callings in Elders Quorum presidencies and as President of the LDS fraternity Sigma Gamma Chi.

After involvement with Evergreen International, Aaron saw a lack of positive, healthy and safe social opportunities especially for gay youth and young adults who shared a Mormon background. As a result, he created Gay LDS Young Adults in March of 2001 in Salt Lake City, Utah. GLYA, a social organization for GLBT Mormon youth and young adults, is now organized in various parts of the western United States.

Since the creation of GLYA, Aaron has been an active advocate for gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender youth and young adults from a Mormon background. He has presented several workshops at national conferences for organizations such as Affirmation, PFLAG and Sunstone Symposium.

Aaron currently resides in Salt Lake City.

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