

THE SIBLING ALLY:

The Significance of the Sibling Relationship When Coming Out as Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual (LGB)

by Casey Gamboni, Ph.D., LMFT

I was 18 years old when I finally said the words out loud. I remember lying on a trampoline while the sun was going down on a warm spring night. I could feel the trampoline's netting on my back expand and tighten with every gust of wind. My heart was pounding, and my palms were sweating so much I could see the beginnings of moisture wrinkles on my fingertips. I was overwhelmed with emotions, realizing that there was going to be a shift in my life that for most people in our heteronormative society don't prepare for. I have always had the tendency to share what is pressing on my mind as soon as possible to relieve the pressure. Like when you use a dish washer and you open it right after its complete. The billowing steam rising to the ceiling. But with this realization, it was easy not to do dishes.

I was at my cousin's High School graduation party with my family in my hometown of Prior Lake, Minnesota. The celebration was inside, and I was outside. I could hear sounds of clinking glasses and laughing just 20 feet away from the nearest entrance into the house. There were so many conversations taking place at one time that they all blended into white noise in my head. It took me about 30 minutes to recognize that I was alienating myself from everyone else when they were under the impression that I was using the restroom. I sat up from my restless state just in time to see my older brother walking toward me.

My relationship with my brother leading up to this moment was a unique blend of affection and warmth combined with clash and opposition (Buist, Deković & Prinzie, 2013), one that I never experienced

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with anyone else. He sat down next to me while we exchanged surface level conversation. After about 5 minutes we were met with silence. Just the two of us sitting there on what is now a chilly dusk evening. “Just do it” I whispered to myself, loud enough for him to hear something but quiet enough that he couldn’t understand what I was saying. He looked over and said: “What are you saying?” I quickly responded with: “I’m gay.”

SIBLINGS

Recent statistics have indicated that 85-90% of the world population has a sibling (Buist, Deković & Prinzie, 2013), yet, from looking at the current literature and research it seems psychological researchers have underestimated or overlooked the value of the sibling relationship (Hilton & Szymanski, 2011). In fact, Buist, Deković & Prinzie (2013) found it to be the most neglected relationship in psychological research and practice. The sibling relationship is one of the longest lasting of a person’s life (Smith, Ronski & Sevcik, 2013) and they are often perceived as providing companionship with a unique influence on one another’s development (Diener, Anderson, Wright & Dunn, 2015). Studies have found that this relationship plays a crucial role in the family’s life when it comes to influence of decisions and resiliency, emphasizing the importance of supports throughout the family system, like mother and father support, to strengthen sibling relationship quality (Jacoby & Heatherington, 2015).

Parents also play a significant role in the development, closeness and view of the sibling relationship. It has been found that many vignettes within sibling literature have focused primarily on the adult sibling relationship, emphasizing relational tears when they were children and not resolved or discussed until adulthood (Wojciak & Gamboni, 2019). This theme perhaps exists based on the parental assumption that siblings will “work things out” or because of similar dynamics based off their own sibling relationships. There needs to be effective communication with all family members to fit everyone’s needs individually for that communication to be impactful. The unfortunate narrative that we “treat all our children the same” seems to have ignored the idea that all people respond, reflect and relate in diverse ways. This perception is present when discussing adults, but children/adolescents seem to be excluded from this idea based on age. Researchers have also indicated the significance of the sibling bond and systemic support when looking at stressful experiences such as coming out as lesbian, gay or bisexual (LGB).

LGB POPULATION

There are significant challenges in measuring the LGB population in the world (Gates, 2014). These challenges include differing definitions such as “coming out” and how to define a same sex relationship, differences in survey methods and the variety of differing questions asked though the surveys provided (Gates, 2014). The

Williams Institute took the average percentages of nine surveys from around the world and concluded that there are over eight million and counting LGB adults in the United States alone, comprising 3.5% of the American adult population. By the way of comparison, the analysis shown in Gates (2014) suggests that the size of the LGB population is equivalent to the population of New Jersey (8 million), the number of adults who reported a same sex sexual experience is the size of Florida (19 million) and adults who reported some same-sex attraction is equivalent to the population of Texas (25.6 million). With those numbers rising, the presence of a support system is crucial in a sexual minority's development.

Studies have shown that coming out as LGB to your sibling can be rather difficult (Cox, Dewaele, Van Houtte & Vincke, 2010; Valentine, Skelton & Butler, 2003). Savin-Williams and Ream (2003) studied over 2,000 LGB individuals and found that 49% disclosed their LGB sexual orientation to their mother first, while 38% first disclosed to their brother or sister. Disclosing one's sexual minority status to a sibling with whom they have a strong sibling relationship can also act as a safeguard against other taxing incidences. Huang, Chen and Ponterotto (2016) discovered that for some LGB individuals, sibling support buffers psychological pain including internalized homophobia and victimization and has the potential to increase the LGB sibling's self-acceptance and comfort.

Even though some individuals come out to their siblings first, overall family dynamics may still lack acceptance for LGB members. Studies have shown that it is important to focus on the sibling's reactions to the coming out experience because it could foreshadow or influence what may happen with the disclosure to the other members of the family (Hilton & Szymanski, 2014). Hilton and Szymanski (2014), found that heterosexual siblings are more accepting of their LGB sibling when they have had contact with LGB individuals, greater knowledge of the LGB community, take a supportive stance on civil rights and tend to have a more liberal ideology when it comes to political affiliations (Hilton & Szymanski). With the high percentage of sibling relationships and rising numbers of LGB individuals coming out, the presence of a sibling ally has shown to assist in decreasing negative mental health outcomes and provide a safe space for sexual minorities (Gamboni, 2019)

LGB RISKS AND THE IMPORTANCE OF ALLIES & ADVOCATES

It has been found that individuals who identify as LGB are at an increasing risk of mental health distress and disorders due to social stress and discrimination (Meyer, 2013). Higher prevalence rates of mental health distress and disorders amongst LGB identified people could be due to stigma of sexual orientation, prejudice and open discrimination which can lead to the creation of stressful environments and negative

mental health outcomes within the marginalized minority groups (Friedman, 1999). Findings have indicated that adolescents who identify as LGB are more likely than heterosexual adolescents to experience depressive symptoms, anxious tendencies and suicidal ideation or attempts (Russell & Joyner 2001; Safren and Heimberg 1999). This differentiation between sexual orientations is due to the stressors LGB individuals face related to having a stigmatized/marginalized identity (Rosario et al. 2002).

Washington & Evans (1991) define an ally as a person who is a member of the dominant majority who works to end oppression in their personal and professional life through support of oppressed populations. However, based on more recent literature on allies and advocates (Brooks, Robards, Gibbs, Lozano & Edwards, 2007), LGBTQ individuals are also allies for each other and can be active members of LGBTQ+ ally groups (Brooks & Edwards, 2009). Fingerhut (2011) found that alliances and advocates are greatest among individuals lower in prejudice and higher positivity towards LGB individuals. Because LGB youth are at risk of negative mental health behaviors and victimization (Kosciw, Palmer, Kull & Greytak, 2013), the presence of allies and advocates within the family system is essential for higher quality of life for LGB youth and adults.

WHAT CAN BE DONE?

When working with LGB clients who aren't coming out to their loved ones, it is very easy to look at that action and assume the lack of disclosure is the presenting problem. I encourage any mental health professional to assess around not only the LGB client's constraints to coming out, but also examine the environment the loved ones are providing for them to do so. Numerous studies have reported that one of the largest constraints for individuals to come out as sexual minorities is the fear that they will be discriminated against, stigmatized or kicked out of the home from their families (McDermott, Roen & Scourfield, 2008; Gorman-Murray, 2008; Savin-Williams, 1994). If family members can create a safe space for their loved ones to come out and disclose their sexual orientation, there is potential for a decrease in suppression of feelings and increase in family cohesion/closeness.

Rejection has also been highlighted as a core fear for LGB individuals to come out, which then leads to a traumatic event. To be clear, not all coming out stories involve trauma, but for the ones that do, a way to avoid this fear could be assisted with a trauma response. Elizabeth Gilbert writes in her book *City of Girls* that when someone comes to you and discloses a trauma, the best response is to come forward with a 2-stage reply (Gilbert, 2019). I hypothesize that the same response can be effective to a loved one who

comes out as a sexual minority. The first stage is a *motherly* response that allows the person to find the love within themselves and recognize what is happening. This response has nothing to do with gender or your relationship with your mother, and it has everything to do with a more emotionally present conversation that is focused on the person disclosing their feelings.

There are studies to support that when a sexual minority comes out, the conversation is too heavily focused on the person they are coming out to and not enough on the sexual minority's feelings and emotions being presented (Armesto & Weisman, 2001). When you are a parent, sibling or loved one met with this disclosure, take into consideration the person's emotional work it took for them to disclose, meet them with questions focusing on how they are feeling and provide the emotional support necessary for them to feel comfortable.

Gilbert then writes that when the motherly role is played and met with emotionally centered conversation, the person then can be met with a *fatherly* response. Again, this trait has nothing to do with gender or your relationship with your father and has everything to do with locating a more action-oriented solution. Gilbert writes that we are too quick to jump to action and need to process the emotional work before action-oriented change (Gilbert, 2019), which for LGB individuals could be same sex attraction exploration, sex, seeking therapeutic assistance or other people to come out to.

CONCLUSION

I was met with a smile. "It's about time" he said to me while looking behind him to make sure no one else was listening. It was right then and there that I was entering a world I could not have even imagined. I was leaving for college in two months and felt the freest to be whomever I chose to be. The world is much bigger than Prior Lake, Minnesota and my brother's response assisted me in seeing that when I needed it the most. As literature supports, coming out to my brother and him meeting me with an accepting response gave me the courage and confidence to come out to my parents one month later (Huang, Chen & Ponterotto, 2016). My brother met all the criteria in Hilton and Szymanski's (2014) findings that he was more liberal with his politics, had LGBT representation in his social circles and was a strong advocate for equality. He even encouraged me to seek therapeutic assistance since LGB youth are at higher risk of mental health distress (Kosciw, Palmer, Kull & Greytak, 2013). It is important to keep in mind that the sibling relationship is one of uniqueness and relatedness. Uniqueness in the sense of it being unlike any other relationship in a person's life and relatedness highlighting them in being the closest clone to ourselves that we have. Because of the ally position my brother took when I came out to him all those years ago, I now never hesitate to do the dishes.

USEFUL RESOURCES

- PFLAG Organizations
<https://pflag.org/loving-families>
- The Trevor Project
https://www.thetrevorproject.org/trvr_support_center/family-friends/
- Strong Family Reliance
<https://www.strongfamilyalliance.org/how-to-come-out-to-parents/>
- Good therapy (Siblings)
<https://www.goodtherapy.org/blog/lgbt-coming-out-considerations-how-siblings-factor-in-0430154>
- Owens-Reid, D., & Russo, K. (2014). *This is a book for parents of gay kids: A question & answer guide to everyday life*. Chronicle Books.
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Casey Gamboni specializes in LGBTQ+ identity and relationships. He received his Ph.D. in couple and family therapy with a concentration in same sex relationships, sibling relationships and anxiety and depression. Dr.

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