



Challenging homophobia and heterosexism

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Introduction

In research published in 1996, Stonewall (an organisation that campaigns for equal rights for lesbian, gay and bisexual people) found that during the previous 5 years, 1 in 3 gay and bisexual men, and 1 in 4 lesbian and bisexual women had experienced violent attacks because of their sexuality. 32% had been harassed and 73% had been verbally abused because they were lesbian, gay or bisexual.

People with learning difficulties also often face prejudice and harassment in their daily lives. Many of the features of this harassment compare with the experiences of discrimination faced by gay, lesbian and bisexual people. Research carried out by the Norah Fry Research Centre (University of Bristol) with Terrence Higgins Trust and REGARD with funding from the Big Lottery Fund, explored the experiences of lesbian, gay and bisexual people with learning difficulties. One of the main findings related to homophobia and discrimination. Of the 20 people we interviewed, 19 told us about being bullied or harassed as a direct result of their sexuality. Much of the verbal abuse came from close family members. Many had experienced direct or indirect homophobia from professionals and four people told us about serious discrimination and harassment in their places of work. Half of the people we interviewed had been physically or verbally abused by strangers on the street or on public transport.

Using this resource

The photos and text in this resource are based on some of the findings from our research study, 'Secret loves, hidden lives? Exploring issues for people with learning difficulties who are gay, lesbian or bisexual'. The resource is aimed at women and men with learning difficulties generally, whatever their sexuality, to explore homophobia and heterosexism.

Using this resource may also show anyone who might be lesbian, gay or bisexual (LGB) but not 'out' (telling people in their lives that they are LGB that it is okay, that there is someone to talk to who will listen to and support them.

The questions to go with the photos are only suggestions or guides. The important thing is to say and reinforce that anyone who is lesbian, gay or bisexual is accepted and that homophobic attitudes will be challenged.

This resource should be part of ongoing work around diversity and equality issues. They are not meant to be used one after the other, but occasionally – people will learn quickly that there are certain responses expected, and will give those, rather than question what they are saying or thinking. Used occasionally over a period of time, they can have more impact.

Homophobia – irrational fear and dislike or hatred of gay men, lesbians and bisexuals.

Heterosexism – the idea that heterosexuality (or, being 'straight') is natural, normal or superior. Heterosexist beliefs include the assumption that everyone should be heterosexual and that everyone is heterosexual, unless known to be otherwise. Heterosexism can be intentional or unintentional. Like other forms of discrimination, it is often invisible to those who are not its targets.

Learning difficulties – The term learning difficulties is the term preferred by self advocacy organisations in the UK. Other terminology used across the world includes learning disability, intellectual disability and developmental disability.

Thank yous

Jill Rutherford took the photographs used in this resource (www.jillrutherford.com) and Karen Gyde created the design and layout. Actors from the Misfits Theatre Company, Bristol and colleagues from the University of Bristol posed for photographs.

Men and women with learning difficulties and their supporters gave us helpful comments on early drafts of the resource.



- Point out that the man has learning difficulties.
- What sort of names do you think he is being called?
- How does the man feel?
- Has anything like this happened to you?
- How did you feel?
- Look at what may be best to do if this happens – what have you done in the past? How did you feel about doing this?



- What do you think now about what is happening in this photograph?
- What do you think of those words?
- How would you feel if you were this man?
- Link with how people feel about being called names for having a learning difficulty.
- What similar things do gay men and people with learning difficulties have to put up with?



- Who are these women?
- How do they know each other?
- What is their relationship?
- What do you think they feel for each other?



- What do you think now?
- Go back to the questions on the previous page and ask them again. Gently challenge any homophobic remarks by asking questions, for example:

‘Ooh, that’s disgusting’
‘What is disgusting about it?’

‘Well, it’s wrong, 2 women like that.’
‘What’s wrong with it?’
- Correct any wrong ‘facts,’ for example:

‘It’s against the law that is.’
‘No it’s not, there isn’t a law that says women can’t have sex together. What makes you think it is?’
- Check that people know the word ‘lesbian’ and what it means.

Weirdos, they're sick,
they should be locked up
and the key thrown away.



- What do you think of what the man is saying?
- What do you think when you see the poster he is pointing at?
- What is the woman in the picture thinking?
- What is she feeling?



I like women, I want a girlfriend. I'm not sick.

- Is this what you expected her to say?
- If you were this woman what would you want?
- Do you know women that have girlfriends?
- What do you think of women having girlfriends?
- Where do you think a woman can find a girlfriend?
- Do you know of any magazines for lesbians?

You don't know what you have missed. You've never had sex with a man so how do you know that you don't fancy men?



- What do you think this man means?
- What do you think the woman feels about what he is saying?
- Do you think that it is true that you always have to try everything before you know whether you like it or not?
- Are there things you haven't tried, but you know you wouldn't like, for example, different kinds of food, flying, going to certain places?
- What makes you think you wouldn't like these things?



- What do you think of her answer?

Useful organisations

The London Lesbian & Gay Switchboard is open 24 hours a day and has details of other switchboards across the UK, ☎ **0 2 0 7 8 3 7 7 3 2 4** and at www.llgs.org.uk

The Terrence Higgins Trust can give advice and support about HIV and sexual health. The headquarters are in London but they will be able to give you details of the office closest to you, ☎ **0 8 4 5 1 2 2 1 2 0 0** and at www.tht.org.uk

REGARD is the UK association for gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender disabled people. They currently offer a penpal and befriending service. Email: regard@dircon.co.uk and see the website at www.regard.org.uk

Stonewall are a campaigning organisation for equal rights for lesbians, gay men and bisexuals. They have information on various issues including violence and hate crimes, 'coming out', and gay pride events. ☎ **0 2 0 7 8 8 1 9 4 4 0** minicom **0 2 0 7 8 8 1 9 9 9 6**, email: info@stonewall.org.uk www.stonewall.org.uk

More information about 'Secret loves, hidden lives?'

'Secret loves, hidden lives? Exploring issues for people with learning difficulties who are gay, lesbian or bisexual,' by David Abbott and Joyce Howarth is published by The Policy Press and is available from Marston Book Services:

Tel: +44 (0)1235 465500

Fax: +44 (0)1235 465556

Email: direct.orders@marston.co.uk

Please go to the 'Online documents' section of the Norah Fry website for information about the following documents:

www.bris.ac.uk/Depts/NorahFry/

1. An 'easy to read' version of this summary.
2. 'Phil's story': a photo-story about a gay man with learning difficulties.
3. 'Jan's story': a photo-story about a lesbian with learning difficulties.
4. A booklet about homophobia and heterosexism for people with learning difficulties and the staff that support them.
5. A resource pack containing information, ideas and training suggestions about sexuality designed to be used by staff working with people with learning difficulties.



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