Annexure 1: Frequently Asked Questions by Family Members When Their Children Come Out

Source: www.orinam.net, www.pflag.com

1. How are sexual orientation and gender identity determined? (Or) Is it my fault that my son/daughter is gay? (Or) Did I fail as a parent?

It is never anyone’s ‘fault’ if they or their loved one grow up to be lesbian/gay/bisexual/TG (LGBT). Please don’t feel guilty, it is certainly not your fault.

No one knows exactly how sexual orientation and gender identity are determined. However, experts agree that it is a complicated matter of genetics, biology, psychological and social factors. For most people, sexual orientation and gender identity are shaped at any early age. While research has not determined a cause, homosexuality and gender variance are not the result of any one factor like parenting or past experiences.

2. Is there something wrong with being gay, lesbian, bisexual or TG?

No. There have been people in all cultures and times throughout human history who have identified themselves as LGBT. Homosexuality is not an illness or a disorder, a fact that is agreed upon by both the American Psychological Association and the American Psychiatric Association. Homosexuality was removed from the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM) of the American Psychiatric Association in 1973. World Health Organization (WHO) removed it in 1981. Being transgender or gender variant is not a disorder either, although Gender Identity Dysphoria (GID) is still listed in the DSM of the American Psychiatric Association. Being LGBT is as much a human variation as being left-handed—a person’s sexual orientation and gender identity are just another piece of who they are. There is nothing wrong with being LGBT—in fact, there’s a lot to celebrate.

3. Can gay people change their sexual orientation or gender identity?

No, and efforts to do so aren’t just unnecessary they’re damaging.

Religious and secular organizations do sponsor campaigns and studies claiming that LGBT people can change their sexual orientation or gender identity because there is something wrong. We believe that it is our anti-LGBT attitudes, laws and policies that need to change, not our LGBT loved ones.

These studies and campaigns suggesting that LGBT people can change are based on ideological biases and not peer-reviewed solid science. No studies show proven long-term changes in gay or TG people, and many reported changes are based solely on behaviour and not a person’s actual self-identity. The American Psychological Association has stated that scientific evidence shows that reparative therapy (therapy which claims to change LGBT people) does not work and that it can do more harm than good.

4. How does someone know they are gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender?

Some people say that they have ‘felt different’ or knew they were attracted to people of the same sex from the time they were very young. Some TG people talk about feeling from an early age that their gender identity did not match parental and social expectations. Others do not figure out their sexual orientation or gender identity until they are adolescents or adults. Often it can take a while for people to put a label to their feelings, or people’s feelings may change over time.
Understanding our sexuality and gender can be a lifelong process, and people shouldn’t worry about labelling themselves right away. However, with positive images of LGBT people more readily available, it is becoming easier for people to identify their feelings and come out at earlier ages. People don’t have to be sexually active to know their sexual orientation – feelings and emotions are as much a part of one’s identity. The short answer is that you’ll know when you know.

5. If one could perceive their sexual orientation/identity at a young age, why did not my son/daughter talk about it to me?

There could be several (and unique) factors/reasons why a child may not discuss his/her sexual attraction/orientation with his/her parents. A critical factor might be the relationship a parents and a child share; in some families it’s very open; in some it’s strict and disciplinarian in nature. In addition to that, there is a general trend among Indian parents to not talk about sex, let alone sexual orientation, with their children. Active avoidance of such an important topic might make the children uncomfortable in discussing this with their parents.

For example imagine if you have a son who is attracted towards a girl. Do you think you would feel uncomfortable if he would like to discuss about it with you? If your answer is yes, then you can then imagine how much harder it would be for your son to talk about his attraction to another boy rather than to a girl.

6. Should I talk to a loved one about his or her sexual orientation or gender identity before the person talks to me?

It’s seldom appropriate to ask a person, ‘Are you gay?’ Your perception of another person’s sexual orientation (gay or straight) or gender identity (male or female) is not necessarily what it appears.

No one can know for sure unless the person has actually declared that they are gay, straight, bisexual, or transgender. We recommend creating a safe space by showing your support of LGBT issues on a non-personal level. For example, take an interest in openly discussing and learning about challenges, struggles and issues faced by LGBT people. Learn about LGBT communities and culture. Come out as an ally, regardless of whether your friend or loved one is LGBT.

7. Did my son/daughter become gay/lesbian because he/she travelled or moved abroad (eg. USA, Britain, Europe, Australia)?

One’s sexual orientation is not dependant on one’s visit or stay abroad. The American Association of Pediatrics (and other leading science/health professional organizations) opine that sexual orientation is probably not determined by any one factor, but by a combination of genetic, hormonal, and environmental influences right as a foetus in the womb of the mother; definitely not due to traveling abroad. (http://aappolicy.aappublications.org/cgi/reprint/pediatrics;113/6/1827.pdf)

Hence this notion that your son/daughter became gay because of going abroad does not have any rational scientific reasoning. The reasons why they could have ‘come-out’ to you after going abroad could be several, like the following:

1. Your son/daughter might have attained the emotional maturity to share their deepest feelings only then.

2. Due to their education and professional exposure they might have gained the self-confidence to talk about it.
3. Modern democracies (like USA, Australia, Europe) have a strong record in human rights where sexual minorities have obtained social and legal recognition, including marriage rights, adoption rights, etc. This could have given your son/daughter the hope and dignity to be themselves.

In summary, there could be several reasons. Irrespective of the reason, you should feel happy and proud that your son/daughter is more confident and is trying to stand up for himself or herself. You should feel proud that you gave the necessary ethical values/lessons while they were growing up, to be confident and honest about themselves.

8. How do same-sex partners have physical intimacy? How is this possible? It's very disgusting to think about it!

Same-sex partners have physical intimacy in many ways. We suggest that you talk about it to an LGBT friendly counsellor/doctor who might be able to point you in the right direction (e.g. websites, brochures etc.).

Some pointers for you:
- There is nothing to feel embarrassed/disgusted about this. This feeling of disgust is usually borne out of lack of knowledge.
- Have you ever wondered how your heterosexual son/daughter/family members have physical intimacy in their marriages? Just like them, your gay son/daughter sometimes could find these questions very private and intimate. However you could cautiously choose to ask appropriate questions on these topics to your gay son/daughter.
- When your gay son/daughter is in love with his/her partner, their relationship is not merely physical. Just like your love for your husband/wife is multi-dimensional encompassing emotional, spiritual, financial and physical intimacy, so would your gay son/daughter have the same kind of intimacy with his/her partner. Never equate their intimacy with their partners as only lust, as it can be very hurtful and judgmental for them.

9. If my son/daughter marries, will that change his/her sexual orientation?

Marriage, which usually in Indian culture is overtly attributed to solve problems, will not work in this context. Several gay men/women have are routinely pressurised by their families and the general society to marry the person of opposite sex. There have also been cases where misled parents have paid huge monies to Swamis/black magicians to ‘change’ their gay son/daughter.

Your gay son/daughter marrying a person of the opposite sex will cause severe emotional trauma to not only the ‘married’ couple but their extended families. These couples due to their emotional and physical incompatibility will be emotionally broken leading to unwanted divorces. Lately several courts in India have compensated divorcing women (who have been duped to marry gay men) with several lakhs of rupees.

If you ever feel pressurised due to society’s compulsion ask yourself, would you let one of your heterosexual daughters marry a known gay man and throw her life into disarray? The more gay men/women are allowed to be themselves (and choose their own partners), the fewer the unwanted divorces and lesser the emotional trauma suffered by everyone in the family.
10. I am able to accept my son/daughter. But how do I deal with relatives and the general society?

Just because your son/daughter ‘came-out’ to you, it does not imply that they are going to go on to rooftops to declare their sexual orientation. Please take time to sit down and talk in detail about this to your child. Chalk up a plan and decide whom you both are comfortable to be ‘out’. You can always take the help of an LGBT friendly counsellor who can help both you and your child in this direction.

One of the simple and easy ways to respond to relatives when confronted about your child’s marriage you could state: ‘He/she is currently not interested in marriage and as a parent I think he/she is mature enough to tell me when he/she is ready.’

There is one important emotional pointer to be understood about your gay son/daughter. Your son/daughter could have had had years and years (sometimes decades) of pent up frustration for having to hide who they truly are and that could have caused them even irreparable emotional trauma. Some of them hence might decide that they don’t have to go through the same kind of pain and decide that they would rather be 'out' to everyone. Even though it might be a huge task for you, you should try to support and empathise with your child’s feelings and wishes.

With human rights and equality being the hallmark for democracies like India, you might be pleasantly surprised that there is lot of awareness of who gay people are. Recently in June 2009, Delhi High Court declared that discrimination based on sexual orientation is illegal and unconstitutional. Such legal, political and media support has improved our society’s understanding of LGBT people and it is growing more tolerant.

11. I would like my son/daughter to have a marriage, family and children. I am apprehensive who might take care of him/her in their old age.

Your wishes and apprehension are valid concern for many parents. Why do you want your children to be married? Your response would usually be that you would like to see your children happy with all comforts as you might know. You could claim that it is your way of attaining happiness which you think would work for them too. But have you ever wondered or asked your children if they would also derive the same satisfaction and fulfillment in life by ‘marrying’?

Not everyone gets married, nor everyone who gets married has kids, nor all parents who have kids end up having kids who take care of them in old age. These are eternal truths of our humankind. There is another truth too: gay/transgender people do get married with their loved ones, adopt and raise kids and have a fulfilling retirement life. However this usually happens in liberal democratic societies (e.g. US, Europe, etc.) and it is unfortunate that it does not happen often in India.

Countries around the globe like Spain, South Africa, Canada, Belgium, Norway, etc., provide legal and social structures for gay marriage, adoption, immigration, pension benefits, and other family-raising incentives. Huge strides have been made for the equality and dignity of LGBT families across the world, including India. As any social taboo takes years to be removed (e.g., untouchability, women’s inequality) and rectified, so does it take time to remove misunderstandings of who LGBT’s are.

Do not despair, Indian society is growing more tolerant and understanding in this modern era. Please support and embrace your gay son/daughter just like thousands of other Indian parents have done in their struggle for equality.