Identity as Strength among LGBTQ Youth

January 07, 2016

LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer/questioning) youth are four times more likely to attempt suicide than their heterosexual peers. Much of this risk is a consequence of being rejected, ostracized, and harassed for simply being who they are. This rejection can come from their peers, their schools, and their families. LGBTQ youth who come from highly rejecting families are more than eight times as likely to attempt suicide as those from families with no or low levels of rejection. LGBTQ youth can also internalize some of the still persuasive attitudes in our society that fail to understand or accept people whose gender identity, gender expression, or sexual orientation do not conform to the stereotypes associated with a person’s biological sex.

It is my experience that the most effective way of helping LGBTQ young people reduce the suicide risk that can result from these social pressures is through strength-based approaches. Strength-based approaches empower young people to participate in finding and using strategies that protect them from the risks and stressors that we cannot completely eliminate from their lives. Central to using a strength-based approach with LGBTQ people is an understanding of an individual’s sexual orientation and gender identity and the way this gender is expressed.

The best way to establish an individual’s gender identity and sexual orientation is simply to ask. Listening and using the terms that young people connect with shows that we respect them and want to understand them. It demonstrates that we accept their identity, that we are open to the role that this identity plays in their lives, and that we will help them find ways to use their identity and their sense of who they are to help protect them from risk.

We cannot let fear stop us from having these conversations. Clinicians and other helping professionals know how
important it is to be able to openly, honestly, and comfortably talk about suicidal behavior and mental health issues. It is equally important to be able to openly, honestly, and comfortably talk about gender identity, gender expression, and sexual orientation. We have learned that asking people if they are thinking about suicide will not contribute to suicide risk. In fact, it shows that someone cares about them and thus can be an important step on the road to recovery. We have learned that we should not be afraid to talk about depression and other psychological challenges. Not talking about mental health issues can add to stigma and stop people from receiving the help they need. We also need to understand how essential open and frank discussions with people about gender identity, gender expression, and sexual orientation are to preventing suicide. These discussions can help us understand the stressors and risk factors in the lives of LGBTQ young people. And these discussions can show us how to help these young people protect themselves from suicide risk by building on their internal strength as well as the strength that can be offered by caring friends, family, and supportive institutions.

For more information on these issues:

View Ashby Dodge’s SPARK Talk on Culturally Competent Care for LGBTQ Youth [1]

Visit the Trevor Support Center [2] where LGBTQ youth and their allies can find answers to frequently asked questions and explore resources related to sexual orientation and gender identity.

Links within this resource