

INTERPRETER OF MALADIES

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Parenting and LGBTQA+

Just a generation back, parenting seemed simpler and anything could be handled with a sound scolding and an occasional smack or two. For parents of current times, things have become more complicated than ever. What can be the best possible solution to support a child who identifies as LGBTQA+? How can parents prepare and address this issue for their children?

Sexual orientation came to the limelight only in the last decade for Bangladesh, and has been widely discussed in the media lately, and public awareness has grown significantly as a result. For a long time, professionals like psychiatrists were trained to diagnose (non-heterosexual) sexual orientation, or gender diversity as a deviation or pathology. This has rightfully generated much controversy and resistance from social activists who found it dehumanising and punitive from service consumer's perspective.

In social psychiatry, we are aware of strong religious bias and social stigma against any variation from so-called 'norm' in terms of sexual orientation, gender identity, or expression. People working in this field have already witnessed its long-term harmful implication on human lives.

LGBTQA+ [Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgendered, Queer, Asexual, etc.] abbreviation is currently used to refer to a wide range of diversity, which has been growing fast, as more and more minority groups are coming out, raising their voices, and joining this social movement against oppression and social stigma. They have gathered the courage to overcome the adversities.

There are common questions from the uninformed public, about whether these issues are genuine at all. I would say, if this is an expression of identity crisis, then the chances are this phase shall either pass automatically, or the youth would remain stuck in this confused state unless the underlying reasons are resolved. It would be also wise to explore if denial or resistance to uncomfortable truth etc. playing a role in questioning these identities. There is also sometimes relentless hope to reverse the process only if s/he co-operates. Psychotherapy can help with letting go of relentless hope in order to accept the reality.

Information gathered from unreliable Internet sources can certainly be confusing for a developing brain. In that case, one can claim ignorance is a bliss instead of knowledge being power. However, simply learning about sexual orientation or gender diversity cannot change the brain the way it is naturally wired.

There are also lot of myths around these issues. There are superstitious beliefs that talking or learning about 'sex' or 'drugs' can make youngsters respectively promiscuous or substance abusers. It is understandable that graphic or vivid description of substance abuse or sexual behaviour can be triggering to the vulnerable, so appropriate caution in this regard is warranted. However, carefully

tailored learning opportunities on sexual orientation or gender diversity cannot cause these issues, perhaps, can rather help to resolve already existing internal conflicts.

Misinformation can be misleading to youth if they are in a rebellious state of mind or have been suffering from other mental health issues (e.g. ego issues, Dissociative Disorder, Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), Borderline Personality Disorder, etc.). The risk is higher if there is no open effective communication between family members. Mental health issues need to be treated by experts in this field without pathologising or trying to change any sense of identity.

In rural Bangladesh, mentally ill people (particularly conditions that were diagnosed as 'hysteria' back in the '80s) were/are believed to be possessed by 'evil force' and used-to-be/are treated very inhumanely through exorcism by uninformed traditional healers, which causes complex trauma to the victim on top of existing mental illnesses.

In one model of treatment, substance abuse is considered a moral failure, or criminal behaviour, and is consequently treated by putting addicted individuals in jail like correctional facilities. This model may work for some, but can be detrimental for others. The fine line between normal and abnormal, moral and immoral, mental illness and criminal behaviour have generated many controversies and have created many confusions all along history.

Nevertheless, vulnerable people seeking help from the wrong people could lead to further deterioration of their mental condition. Gender diversity and variation in sexual orientation have always existed in recorded society. However, rights of all minority groups have gained attention and momentum only in the recent past in developed countries.

In a just society, it is a natural and logical consequence of fight for equal rights for religious and racial minorities. In the context of Indian subcontinent, intolerance to minority groups (e.g. political and religious) is well known which is just the tip of an iceberg. Power of majority in democratic process is not supposed to be used to oppress minorities.

In my opinion, religious and political groups are more organised and powerful to defend their rights than other minority groups like LGBTQA+, who often cannot even dare to exist.

Parents want these issues to disappear because it brings too much stress to the family. They think "don't talk, don't feel, don't act" should be the answer.

In an adverse social/familial situation, if a youth is questioning these self-identity issues, it could be scary for loving parents. There is legitimate concern if this is the right time for these minorities to come out and take the bull by its horn or should they wait for a better time. Safety, trust and acceptance are essential components of human development irrespective of



race, religion, sexual orientation, gender identity, etc.

Life is short, coming out (as LGBTQA+ community member) process can be extremely lengthy if it is complicated with mental illnesses, addiction or social alienation. Distressed parents can seek help from counselling to work through their grief (losing the hope of having grandchildren, not having the child they have wished for). Sadness can be turned into joy and strength by becoming an ally and a champion for minority rights.

Stigma works silently but can be deadly. Please do not judge people by their looks. Do not question other people's sexual orientation or gender identity. Do not confuse LGBTQA+ with polygamy nor with paedophilia. No one has a right to talk about other people's personal issues, so do not make assumptions.

Do not allow anyone to bully others by calling names. The LGBTQA+ community members can be productive members of the society, often holding high positions, and there is no way one could tell from outside appearance what their personal life is like. After all, it is not your call to make!

Be supportive and wait patiently for the person to come out the way they think is authentic to them.

Lots of literature, research articles, and evidence-based practices support treating diversity in sexual orientation and gender identity as natural and normal. The brain is wired differently for different people and should not be manipulated or coerced to change, which often brings negative results.

It is the fear of "unknown" or feeling "threatened" by others who "do not look like, talk like or act like me" (egoistic attitude) that seems to contribute a lot in pathologising and victimising these diverse minorities who dare to live the way they are.

Our parents and grandparents could afford to be naive and practice corporal punishment to set children on the right path. Besides, back then they did not have

this information available to them to make informed decisions. Behaviour science tells us a different story today-- denying or pushing it under the rug does not make things go away.

Life is different for this millennial generation in many ways. Young adults of Bangladesh are travelling widely and have access to the Internet. Parents should try to gather the right information and join the conversation, in a non-judgemental way.

A free tolerant society can create some room for all kind of minority groups who are harmless to others. After all, LGBTQA+ is not a disease, then why treat it like an infectious or contagious problem? People deserve to be treated with respect for the way they are born.

If someone is confused and wants to explore personal sexual or gender issues, there is possibly something underneath it. This could be a natural coming out process or a mental health issue (an egg or hen dilemma where mental health forms a vicious cycle with sexual orientation and gender issue). On another note, these individuals who are bold enough to self-explore in the face of social adversity, if it turns out that they actually belong to the mainstream population, could then become allies of oppressed groups, a voice against social stigma, a ray of hope for the vulnerable.

If your child identifies as a member of LGBTQA+ community, be supportive. Accept (not just tolerate) and love the child unconditionally. They deserve all the opportunities to build life the way any other child does. So, do not discriminate, and do not divulge any personal information without your child's permission.

Let your child know that you are willing to listen without judgment and assure the child that they will not be abandoned or punished by you for the way they have been created. Chances of having a happy fulfilling life multiplies manifold if there is familial and social acceptance.

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