

THRIVING
VALUES™



WHEN A LOVED ONE SAYS, "I'M GAY"

A guide for parents

JEFF JOHNSTON

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A PLACE TO START

If you are faced with a loved one's homosexuality, this is a place to begin learning, healing and growing. While a resource of this length cannot provide all the information you will need for dealing with a difficult issue like homosexuality in the family, it is a great place to start. We've done our best to offer as much help, information and guidance as possible, including suggestions and links to more in-depth resources.

*"God is our refuge and strength,
a very present help in trouble."*

—PSALM 46:1 (ESV)

*And while this resource is geared toward parents, we trust that **spouses**, other family members, and **friends** of gay-identified men and women will be able to glean some helpful guidance.*

As you read, you will find: brief vignettes from those with a gay-identified child; goals and guidelines for maintaining a relationship with your child; information on grief, recovery and building a support network; stories from those who have left homosexuality; and links to other helpful resources.

We trust God will use this resource to bring hope, healing, comfort and encouragement as you travel this road with your loved one.

HOMOSEXUALITY IN THE CULTURE

We live in a time where "sexual fluidity" and the celebration of homosexuality are commonplace. One outcome of this is that more people now identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender, with greater numbers in younger age groups. A 2012 Gallup poll found that 3.5% of American adults identified as lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender (LGBT). **But that percentage increased to 4.5% in 2017, and within that survey, 8.1% of Millennials—those born between 1981 and 1996—identified as LGBT.**¹

AMERICANS IDENTIFIED AS LGBT (2017)



Even more of the next generation identifies as something other than heterosexual: 12% of Gen Z teens, according to one poll.² That's a startling increase from generation to generation over such a short period of time.



There are many contributing factors for this upswing, including:

- Almost 50 years of “gay pride” activism.
- The celebration of homosexuality in our entertainment and media, along with the growing number of LGBT-identified celebrities.
- The shift in our culture’s thinking about sex and sexuality: What used to be sexual *activity* has now become an *identity*.³
- The “sexual revolution” and its fallout, including greater promiscuity, family breakdown, and easy access to pornography.
- Our societal rebellion against authority and rejection of absolute truth.
- The promotion of homosexuality and a variety of “gender identities” in our children’s education.

QUESTION:

“Homosexuality has become so prevalent in the culture—how do I talk with my children about this issue?”

GET THE ANSWER

So it’s not surprising there’s a large upswing in teens and young adults identifying as homosexual or bisexual. One thing these polls also indicate: ***Homosexuality has a strong cultural component. If people***

were “born gay,” we would not see such a large increase, in such a short time span, in identification as homosexual or bisexual.⁴

WHEN HOMOSEXUALITY HITS HOME

These trends mean we are more likely to see young people—in our schools, ministries, churches and families—questioning their sexuality, turning away from a biblical sexual ethic and “coming out” as gay, lesbian or bisexual.

QUESTION:

“What can we say to our teenage son who has just announced to us that he’s gay? I’m devastated by this revelation.”

GET THE ANSWER

However, we should keep in mind a couple of key factors. Many population studies show a general movement away from homosexuality back to opposite-sex relationships over time.⁵ And for adolescents, especially, many of those who experience same-sex attractions or question their identity are likely to shift back toward opposite-sex attractions and a heterosexual identity.⁶

When faced with a child's homosexual attractions, behavior or identity, ***we suggest parents carefully think through what they want to accomplish.***

WHAT IS YOUR DESIRE FOR YOUR CHILD?



As you consider your loved one's situation, what is it you would like to see happen? What are your goals? What would you like God to do? Certainly, it would be good if your son or daughter turned away from homosexuality, didn't identify as gay anymore or stopped acting out sexually. But what if they walked away from homosexuality and never became a child of God? What if they began having opposite-sex relationships but never became a follower of Christ? What about those who believe Christianity and homosexuality are **compatible**? We encourage parents to consider and discuss these questions with trusted advisors.

Our desire should be greater than that our children leave homosexuality: We want our loved ones to come to Christ for salvation and to follow Him. We want them to experience Christ's life. However, this is something we can't *make* happen. You can't force faith and salvation on your child.

So what are some reasonable, achievable goals for a parent? At Focus on the Family, when people call and speak with our counseling staff, we suggest two goals to work toward: ***Maintain a relationship and maintain a godly influence with your son or daughter.***

QUESTION:

"Can you help us figure out how to respond to our grown son who has just informed us that he's a homosexual? This announcement has turned our world upside down."

GET THE ANSWER

Here are just a few reasons we think these are good goals to work toward:

- ***It's important for parents to relate to their children with both grace and truth.*** Grace offers compassion and demonstrates love, just as Jesus did when He interacted with people. Truth affirms we are made in God's image, but we are desperately fallen, and we have redemption available through Christ. Both grace and truth are needed for healthy change, growth and relationships.⁷
- ***God's Word does not advise us to approve and celebrate homosexuality*** but clearly

“Jesus stood up and said to her, ‘Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?’ She said, ‘No one, Lord.’ And Jesus said, ‘Neither do I condemn you; go, and from now on sin no more.’”

—JOHN 8:10-11 (ESV)

teaches God’s design for our relationships, sexuality and marriage.⁸

■ At the same time, **God’s Word calls us to follow Jesus’ example, reaching out with love to those caught in sin.**

- **Trying to fix, control or change loved ones doesn’t work.** In fact, it may push them away from us.
- **Your child may have been struggling with homosexual attractions, behaviors and identity for years.** It will take *you* time, as well, to understand his or her thoughts, feelings, and beliefs, and build a deeper relationship with your child.

Of course, if your child is still a minor and in your home, you may set boundaries on behavior and respond appropriately to disobedience, but that’s very different from trying to fix or change your child. In addition, if you have safety concerns about your teen, you might need to take a different action. In all cases, communicate your love and concern.

RESTORING THE RELATIONSHIP

Here are some ideas for building, restoring or maintaining a relationship with a loved one:

- **Demonstrate love.** As Scripture teaches, we must love others with our actions and our words. Model sacrificial love. Tell them, “I love you as you are. I will always love you. This does not change my love for you.”
- **Affirm and connect.** You might say things like, “Thank you for sharing this with me” or “I want to know you and relate to you, so I’m glad you told me about this area of your life.”

QUESTION:

“Why don’t Christians care about homosexuals and their families? I came out as a lesbian about a year ago, and ever since that time, my family won’t have anything to do with me.”

GET THE ANSWER

- **Listen and ask questions.** Pause, learn and work to understand your son or daughter. Go slowly and ask permission to ask more

questions. “I know it’s not easy to talk to parents about sexual thoughts or behaviors, so I appreciate you telling me. When you’re ready, could we talk more about this?”

QUESTION:

“Should we allow our adult son to bring his same-sex partner to family gatherings?”

GET THE ANSWER

■ **Give yourself time.** Say something like, “Wow. This is really a surprise to me, but it’s something you’ve been dealing with for a while. Could you give me time to think and pray about this? And at some point, may I ask you more questions?”

■ **If you’ve already reacted, change your course.** If you have tried to control or manipulate your adult son or daughter or responded in anger, follow what Scripture teaches: Confess to God and to the one you’ve sinned against. Humbly repent and ask for forgiveness. Seek the Lord for change, healing and restoration of the relationship.

■ **Don’t make this issue the focal point of your relationship with your child.** See beyond their homosexuality. Would you enjoy it if people only related to you at the point of your struggle with sin?

■ **View this as an opportunity to deepen intimacy with your child.** The fact he or she has disclosed this allows you to know more about your son’s or daughter’s experience. It removes barriers they had in place. “I’m so glad we’ve spoken about this. I’d rather *know* what you’re going through than *not know*.”

In addition to the above points, we strongly encourage you **not to label your children** as “gay,” “lesbian,” “bisexual” or even “homosexual.” Words are powerful and have an impact; labeling someone pushes them toward that identity. Instead, we suggest being intentional about differentiating between the many components of human sexuality, including thoughts, romantic and sexual feelings, behaviors, and identity.

QUESTION:

“What should we say to our college-age son who claims to be a ‘gay Christian’?”

GET THE ANSWER

Many people say, “I feel it; therefore, I must be it and act on it.” In sharp contrast, the Bible talks about homosexual *lust* and *behavior* but not about homosexuality as an *identity*.

PRAYERS AVAIL MUCH

Maintaining a godly influence with your son or daughter includes some of the skills and attitudes we've mentioned above; however, the most important thing you can do is pray:

- **Pray** that the “Hound of Heaven” will pursue your loved one relentlessly.
- **Pray** that your loved one will become aware of the consequences of sin, so he or she can be led to a change of heart.

PRAY YOUR HEART
WILL REMAIN OPEN
TO YOUR LOVED ONE.

Remember, God's ultimate goal is not punishment, but repentance, and His kindness leads us toward it (Romans 2:4).

- **Pray** your heart will remain open to your loved one so you can be a channel of God's grace.

Watch this [redemptive story](#) of a wife and mother, Nancy Heche, who faced homosexuality in her husband and daughter.⁹

- **Pray** that God will continue to work in your own mind, heart and life, so your prayers can become even more powerful and effective in your loved one's life.



Even goals like this aren't fully attainable on our own. The reality is some children cut off relationships with their parents, whether out of rebellion, anger, fear or some other reason. Our hearts grieve with those who experience

this loss. For those parents: Even as you pray for the chance to restore the relationship, you still have the opportunity to maintain a godly influence—through the power of prayer.

A MOTHER'S PRAYERS

“My mother began to pray a bold prayer: ‘Lord, do whatever it takes to bring this prodigal son to you.’ For seven years, she fasted every Monday, and once fasted 39 days for me.

As my situation became more and more bleak, she immersed herself deeper into God's Word. My mother spent hours each morning in her prayer closet reading her Bible and interceding for others. In addition, she stepped out of her comfort zone and began to minister to other women as a Bible Study Fellowship discussion group leader. Her obedience and transparency in service was essential for her own healing.

“Like the persistent widow, my mother kept bombarding heaven with her desperate pleas. She knew it would take nothing short of a miracle



OUT OF A FAR COUNTRY

Read more of Angela Yuan's story with her son Christopher in their book, ***Out of a Far Country***.

to bring this prodigal son to the Father. The answer came one day with a knock on my door. It was 12 Drug Enforcement Administration agents, Atlanta police, and 2 German Shepherd dogs. They confiscated a shipment equivalent to the street value of 9.1 tons of marijuana. Sitting in jail, I quickly

realized who my true friends were when no one accepted my collect calls. As a last resort, I dialed home, dreading the response on the other side as I imagined the earful that I was going to get. But my mother's first words were, 'Son, are you okay?'"¹⁰

INVEST IN YOUR OWN RECOVERY AND SUPPORT

You hear this potentially life-saving message before taking off on an airplane,

"It's unlikely; but if cabin pressure changes, the panels above your seat will open, revealing oxygen masks. If this happens, reach up and pull the mask toward you until the tube is fully extended. Place

the mask over your nose and mouth, slip the elastic strap over your head and adjust the mask, if necessary. Breathe normally and know that oxygen is flowing; so don't worry if the bag doesn't inflate. ***Be sure to adjust your own mask before helping others.***"¹¹

QUESTION:

"Can I talk with a Focus on the Family counselor?"

GET THE ANSWER

The airline emergency message also applies to life on the ground: Secure your own "oxygen mask" first, before trying to help your son or daughter. If you are rendered helpless, you will be unable to help your child. ***When dealing with a serious issue like a son's or daughter's homosexuality, it's vital that you first get help and support for yourself.***

If you are unsure about your own faith, unable to trust God, fearful about the future, disconnected from others, struggling with sexual sins of your own, or unable to receive help from others, how can you possibly help a son or daughter who identifies as gay, lesbian or bisexual?

The goal is to release your child to God and focus on your own spiritual, emotional, mental and physical health. Here are a few important ways you can find strength, comfort and solid ground for yourself as you are navigating your relationship with your child:

■ **Connect with God.** It's important that you maintain your relationship with God: Pray and listen, read Scripture, worship, spend time with the Father and cry out to Him.

■ **Connect with the body of Christ.** You are not alone in the church—there are other parents of prodigals, too. Work at building a support network. Find safe people who will listen to you, bring comfort and pray with you. Guilt and shame cause us to separate from others. Pride is often the flipside of shame, causing us to worry about “what others will think” and making us afraid to “impose” on others. Men, especially, may find it difficult to ask for help and to connect with others. Push through

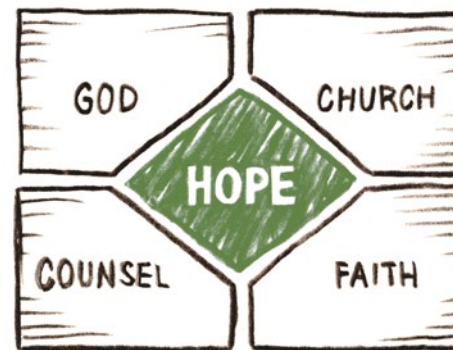
any guilt, shame or pride, and work at deepening your own relationships.

■ **Find professional or pastoral support and counsel.** Please be cautious with this, as there are wolves in sheep's clothing. Many therapists and some clergy (and churches and denominations, too) have revised their

views of God, Scripture, and sexuality, and now approve of homosexual relationships. Ask the therapist or pastor what they believe about the Bible, sexuality and homosexuality. If you were buying a car, you would ask a lot of questions and do your research. Think about how much more

important this is: You're putting your soul into another person's care. Be prepared with a list of questions and beware of “gay-affirming” therapists. If you need help finding a mental health professional, check out Focus on the Family's **Christian Counselors Network**. We work to vet our list, but you should still confirm that any Christian counselor's views about homosexuality align with Scripture.

■ **Get equipped and learn about this issue.** There are many resources available today. We have a **number of articles** and a complete



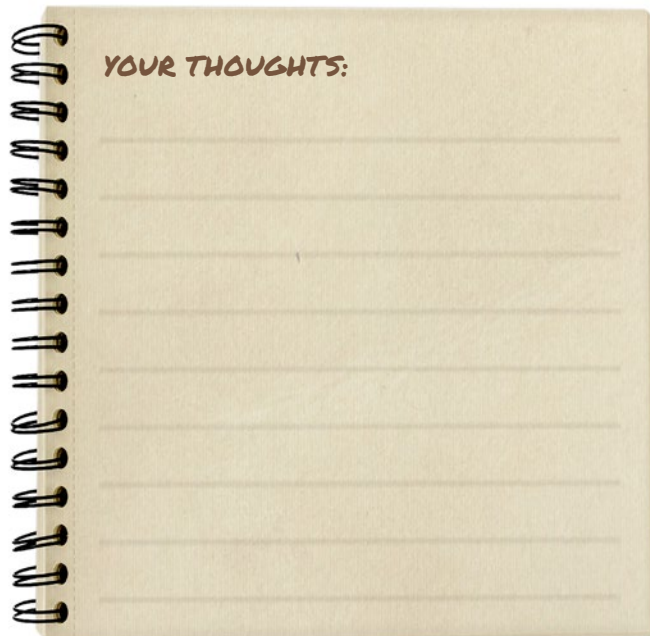
QUESTION:

“How do we break the news to our friends and extended family that our oldest son now self-identifies as a homosexual?”

GET THE ANSWER

resource list available at Focus on the Family. Here are two helpful books for parents, just for starters: *If I Tell You I'm Gay, Will You Still Love Me?* by Ann Mobley and *When Homosexuality Hits Home: What to Do When a Loved One Says, "I'm Gay,"* by Joe Dallas.

- **Cling to faith and hope.** God is powerful, loving and good. Remember this and meditate on God's character, and know that salvation comes from His goodness, not our own (or our loved one's). Our hope and faith are in Him.



Remember, too, that mothers and fathers deal with emotional issues differently and find support in different ways. Acknowledge the differences and allow each other that freedom. Men usually have fewer people to talk to about deep issues and may have fewer connections. Fathers may need more time to develop a solid support network. This is not a time to retreat, but a time for men to reach out for the information and connection they need.

A MOTHER'S STORY

Ann Mobley writes in her book, *If I Tell You I'm Gay, Will You Still Love Me?*

*"Make it your first priority to strengthen your own personal relationship with God through time in His Word and in prayer. You will need His guidance, wisdom, strength, direction, encouragement, perseverance and hope for this journey. Let God reveal to you your own sins and faults, and honestly deal with them when He does."*¹²

WHEN YOUR CHILD STRUGGLES WITH THEIR SEXUAL IDENTITY



Listen to this **Focus on the Family® Broadcast** as Ann Mobley gives guidance and encouragement to parents struggling with their child's homosexuality.

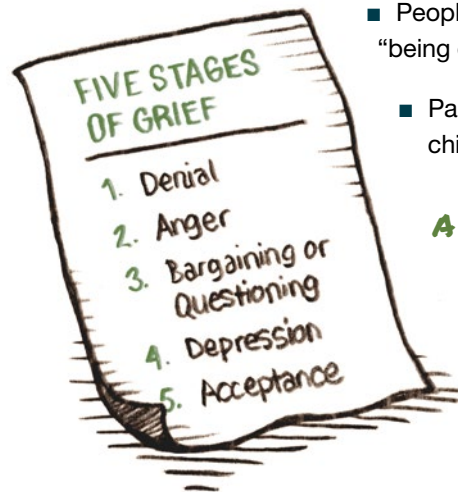
NAVIGATING GRIEF AND LOSS

For Christian parents, learning a son or daughter is struggling with homosexuality can be extremely painful and confusing. Christians who know God's intent for sexuality, relationships and marriage understand that homosexual behavior falls outside that design and is a grievous sin. We want the best for our children, and we believe identifying as gay

and becoming involved in same-sex relationships is harmful and damaging.

In addition, here are some other reasons parents may struggle deeply with their child's disclosure:

- Homosexuality—"being gay"—often becomes the person's primary identity.
- Those who embrace a gay identity may abandon biblical beliefs and values they once held.
- Some Christians mistakenly see this as the worst sin possible.
- People wrongly believe "being lesbian" or "being gay" is inborn and unchangeable.
- Parents often feel responsible for their children and their children's choices.



PAUL SAYS THAT
BECAUSE GOD HAS
COMFORTED HIM,
HE IS ABLE TO PASS
ON THAT COMFORT
TO OTHERS.

A FATHER'S STORY

"'Mark,' I hesitated, not knowing just how to ask; then I blurted out, 'Mark, are you involved with other men?' For a moment Mark was too embarrassed to look at us directly;

then quietly said, 'Dad, Mom, I must tell you now that I am gay.' His answer was not offered in pride; actually, he almost seemed to cringe.

"Our hearts fell. Until a few days earlier, we had no suspicion, whatsoever, that this was the case.

Furiously, the questions raced through our minds. How could our son, so active in his Christian witness only a few weeks before, suddenly reject the clear teaching of Scripture? Who had seduced him? What kind of a person was he? Where had we failed him? Had we not reared him to be God fearing? Why Mark? Why? Why?"¹³

Please know grief is an appropriate, God-given response to loss, pain, sin or hurt. We feel grief when we love someone and see them harmed. Or we grieve when we see them sin, because we understand that sin is destructive. We grieve when we have lost something. It's part of our God-given makeup. We know God grieves over loss, pain, sin or hurt because He loves us so deeply.

In our grief, God calls us to reach out to others and be comforted. The Apostle Paul tells us in Second Corinthians that God is the "God of all comfort." Paul says that because God has comforted him, he is able to pass on that comfort to others.

We are not designed to grieve alone: ***Grief is designed to propel us into connections with other people and with God.*** When you've lost something or someone—and you're grieving—there's been a disconnection, a broken relationship. Grieving and receiving comfort, from God and others, allows us to strengthen existing connections or build new ones, as we deepen relationships with those who empathize and care for us.

WE ARE NOT
DESIGNED TO
GRIEVE ALONE.

QUESTION:

“How do we cope with the emotional impact of our son's recent revelation that he considers himself gay?”

GET THE ANSWER

One concept that may help you is understanding the “five stages of grief.” If you're not familiar with this, our [online article](#) explains the stages. In addition, here are more concepts to help you navigate this process:

■ ***Grief doesn't just go away over time.***

Receiving comfort and connecting with others helps people move on to healing. Isolation keeps grief inside, unresolved and uncomfortable. God made us to need Him and other people and to be in deep relationship with Him and others. We need people who support us, listen to us, comfort us, grieve with us and encourage us.

■ ***This is not an orderly process or a neat progression.***

The reality is the grieving process is messy. Someone might move back and forth between stages, skip some or repeat them. You may think you've reached “acceptance and resolution,” only to be pitched back into anger or depression again.

■ ***Grief from today sometimes taps into grief from the past.***

You may even find memories and pain coming up from seemingly unrelated events in your life. You'll need to grieve these unresolved issues, as well.

■ ***Sometimes people get stuck in this process.***

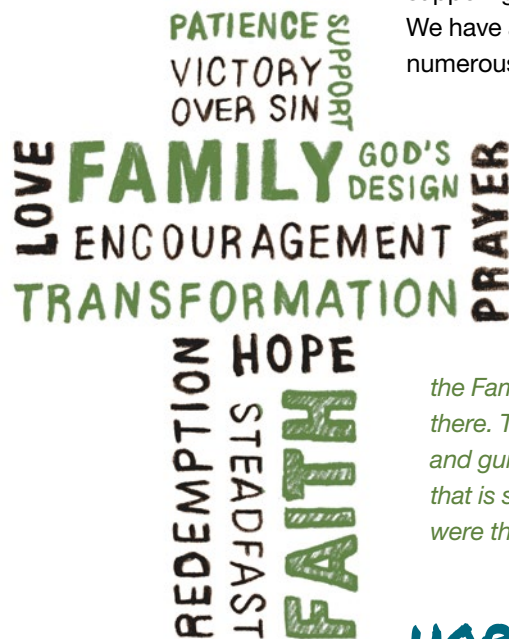
You might need help from a godly, experienced Christian counselor.

■ ***Men and women may handle grief differently.***

Spouses may experience and manage their emotions, thoughts and relationships in very different ways.

■ ***Adults and children respond to grief in different ways.***

Children affected by a family member's homosexuality need help to deal with their questions, fears and grief. They don't always have words for what they are feeling. It's important for adults to come alongside and assist them in this process.



Thankfully, there are many resources available to help parents through this process, including support groups, books, videos and counselors. We have a [helpful online resource list](#) with numerous links.

A MOTHER'S JOURNEY

"Ten years ago, my 18-year-old son told us he was gay. That rocked my world beyond anything I've ever experienced. Shock, fear, and grief ravaged our family. I called Focus on the Family the next day and spoke to a counselor there. That was the first step in getting the support and guidance needed to sustain the faith journey that is still ongoing for my son. Thank you—you were there for me when I needed you most!"

HOPE FOR THE FUTURE

As noted earlier, our strongest desire for our children is that they come to the Lord and follow Him.

Be encouraged! There are many who once embraced a homosexual identity, only to find it didn't satisfy the deepest longings of their heart.

Many return to the Christian faith. Some come to Christ for the very first time, and as they grow in faith, they seek to follow God's design for their sexuality and relationships—whether through

chastity in singleness or through marriage to a spouse of the opposite sex.

AN OVERCOMER'S STORY

Tom Cole, now happily married with four children, remembers how the witness of a Christian coworker changed the whole direction of his life. He was 26 at the time and had been involved in dozens of gay relationships since the age of 19. He was desperate and lonely.

Then he met a woman named Rosie, a waitress at the restaurant where Tom was a cook. Tom was flagrant about his homosexuality, and Rosie was equally outspoken about her Christian faith.

One night as she was leaving work to go home, Rosie told Tom, "My husband and I will be praying for you."

Tom was shocked. "You pray for me?"

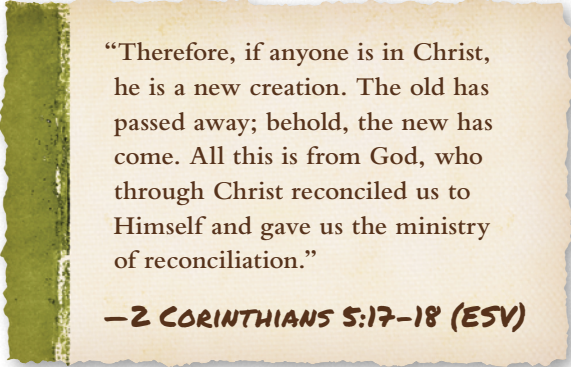
"Yes," Rosie said, "We pray for you every night." As she went out the door, she added, "Tom, I love you. I just want you to know that I love you."

Tom recalls the impact of her words:

"The words ripped my heart open. I knew she was speaking the truth. I knew she loved me. All the years of hurt and pain and hardness were

suddenly broken open. The wall I had erected in my heart was blasted down. I began to cry as the realization of what she'd said hit me. I ducked under the counter so she couldn't see me crying. I knew at that moment that whatever it was she had, I wanted it too."

Several weeks later, Tom went to church with Rosie and her husband and accepted Christ. They disciplined Tom as a new believer. His early days as a Christian were not without serious challenges, Tom admits:



"Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come. All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to Himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation."

—2 CORINTHIANS 5:17-18 (ESV)

"They saw me stumble and fall and then watched God pick me back up. They saw me come to Bible study and prayer meetings at their home drunk or high. But through it all, they walked with me; they prayed for me; they showed me God's truth in Scripture. I would not be alive today if it weren't for the witness of this beautiful woman in Christ."¹⁴

This is just one of the hundreds of testimonies from men and women who have walked away from homosexual behavior, identity, thoughts and even attractions. Read some of these stories in our online series, **"Freedom From Homosexuality."**

Turning away from homosexuality is usually not an instantaneous process. When people come to Christ, they are not automatically transformed from "gay to straight." It also does not mean that those who leave homosexuality never again have same-sex attractions.

But redemption is possible; victory over sin is achievable, and men and women are walking away from homosexuality all the time. We also recommend reading the article, **"What Do We Mean When We Talk About Change from Homosexuality?"**

As you walk this journey with your gay-identified loved one, we pray you will know God's peace and comfort, remain courageously steadfast in the truth and know your child will be impacted by Christ's love demonstrated through you!

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Endnotes

1. Frank Newport, "In U.S., Estimate of LGBT Population Rises to 4.5%," Gallup Online, May 22, 2018. ↩
2. Kate Shellnutt, "Get Ready, Youth Group Leaders: Teens Twice as Likely to Identify as Atheist or LGBT," *Christianity Today Online*, January 23, 2018. ↩
3. See our resource "Understanding Male Homosexuality: God's Power to Change Lives" (<http://bit.ly/1Vslv5i>), which has an explanation of this shift in language, culture and thinking. ↩
4. See, for example, Dr. N.E. Whitehead and Briar Whitehead, *My Genes Made Me Do It! Homosexuality and the Scientific Evidence, Fifth Edition*, January 2018, especially chapters 2, 3 and 6. ↩
5. *Ibid.*, chapters 2, 11 and 12. See also Jeremiah Keenan, "While You Probably Think Same-Sex Attraction Is Fixed, Researchers Don't," *The Federalist Online*, April 5, 2018. ↩
6. See above, and Dr. N.E. Whitehead, "Adolescent Sexual Orientation: Surprising amounts of change," October 2009. ↩
7. For a helpful explanation of this, see Dr. Henry Cloud, *Changes That Heal* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2003). ↩
8. See our series "Homosexuality, Theology and the Church" (<http://bit.ly/1jB4aMX>). ↩
9. Nancy's book tells more of her story: *The Truth Comes Out: The Story of My Heart's Transformation* (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 2006). ↩
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13. Norman Carson, *Precious Son: The Impact of AIDS on an Evangelical Family* (Denver, CO: Outskirts Press, Inc., 2012), p.27. ↩
14. Adapted and quoted from "If Only You'd Been a Girl," from Bob Davies and Lela Gilbert, *Portraits of Freedom: 14 People Who Came Out of Homosexuality* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001), ch.9. ↩