Dealing with Issues of Homosexuality: A Qualitative Study of Six Mormons

A. Dean Byrd
Mark D. Chamberlain

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/irp

Recommended Citation

This Article or Essay is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in Issues in Religion and Psychotherapy by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact scholarsarchive@byu.edu, ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.
Dealing with Issues of Homosexuality: A Qualitative Study of Six Mormons

A. Dean Byrd, Ph.D.
Mark D. Chamberlain

Abstract

Individuals who experience feelings of homosexual attraction and yet maintain commitment to the LDS Church, with its strong prohibition against homosexual behavior, face a difficult challenge. Mormon counselors and psychotherapists are frequently sought out by such clients. In addition, such individuals may turn to family members, ecclesiastical leaders and friends. Fortunately, the availability of information for helping others understand and assist such individuals is increasing. This article is based on a study designed with the intention of adding to such resources. It is hoped that this account, based on the perspective of those personally dealing with issues of homosexuality, will assist those who seek to understand and help other such individuals.

In the present study, we interviewed six participants, four males and two females, about their experience dealing with issues of homosexuality.¹

¹Those who participated in this research were more co-researchers and co-authors than "research subjects." They are truly silent heroes: although they remain anonymous because of the socially unacceptable nature of homosexuality, they have demonstrated profound faith and persistence in the face of adversity.
Referral Sources

Five therapists, four employed by LDS Social Services and one in private practice, specializing in the treatment of individuals dealing with issues of homosexuality were approached individually and requested to refer clients for participation in this study. In addition, requests for referrals were made at a session of the April 1992 AMCAP conference, through informal announcement. A total of ten individuals were referred, the first six of whom make up the group of participants interviewed for this study. These six participants were referred by three of the therapists who were approached individually. These therapists all adhere to the general model of treatment known as “reparative therapy” (Nicolosi, 1991) which theorizes that the individuals’ sexual attraction to the same gender results from emotional needs that have become sexualized. In this treatment approach, the focus is on working to compensate for deficits which have resulted from problematic early experiences—most notably a failure to bond and identify with the same-sex parent.

Research Participants (Subjects)

All six participants sought therapy in an effort to cope without acting or continuing to act on their feelings of homosexual attraction. Furthermore, all were involved in the treatment described above. Therefore, descriptions provided in this study may not apply to those who have no such desire to avoid homosexual behavior or who attempt to cope without participation in such therapy.

Four of the participants are male and two are female. The age of participants ranged from 22 to 53. In terms of demographics, aside from age and gender, the subjects comprise a relatively homogenous group. The level of education of participants was similar: each has graduated from high school and completed at least some college. At the time of the study, all participants resided within the Salt Lake/Utah County area.

The participants’ length of time participating in therapy prior to involvement in the study varied from six months to four years.
In addition to individual therapy, five of the six participants have also been involved in group therapy/support groups regarding this issue. Three of the four men in the study have also been involved in a Salt Lake area Saturday Morning sports therapy program supervised by Dan Gray, MSW.

When reporting research on participants who are involved in therapy, the question of “cure-rate” inevitably comes up. It is our opinion that any attempt to label any participant as “disordered” or “cured” through objective measurement would be incidental, and perhaps counter, to our goal of understanding and describing their experience. However, the specific role of psychotherapy in the process of coping was not the sole focus of the study. Rather, our interest was in the variety of factors which played a role in the participants’ efforts to cope. Although all participants were involved in therapy at the time they were interviewed, the reader will note throughout this report that psychotherapy *per se* was not the primary focus of the interviews.

Participants varied in the extent to which they had engaged in homosexual behavior and their involvement in the gay or lesbian lifestyle. Two of the participants had never engaged in homosexual behavior with another individual, had never seen homosexual pornography, and had kept the feelings of homosexual attraction to themselves before seeking treatment. The other four had become sexually involved in homosexual relationships to various extents. At the time of the interviews, each participant reported that he or she was not currently involved in same-gender sexual relationships. Again, however, this is not interpreted as an indication of “cure,” and future homosexual involvement on the part of an individual participant would not invalidate their experience as reported for the purpose of this study.

**Data Gathering and Analysis**

The data was gathered using in-depth qualitative interviewing techniques (Taylor and Bogdan, 1984). Interviews followed a semi-structured format: an interview guide (see Appendix A) provided a list of topics to be covered, which were explored with open-ended questions and probes following previous responses by the partici-
Each participant was interviewed on three to five separate occasions. A total of four to eight hours was spent with each participant, averaging approximately five and a half hours. Four of the six individuals were interviewed in the Sandy and Provo offices of LDS Social Services. Due to time constraints, one participant was interviewed in a number of different locations, depending on that individual's schedule for the day. Finally, out of concern for confidentiality, one individual requested that all interviews be done by phone.

All of the interviews were audio-taped and the content of the audio tapes was transcribed. The data were analyzed according to the guidelines outlined by Tesch (1990, pp. 85-92). First, the audio tapes and transcripts were repeatedly and intensively reviewed. As the content of the interviews was reviewed, the transcripts were sectioned according to topic or theme of content. When topics or themes were noted repeatedly, they were designated as "categories," and the sections or chunks of interview data which related to that topic were labeled and indexed accordingly. Finally, the chunks of interview data were separated according to category so that the content of these new groupings cut across interview and participant. The interview data was then analyzed by category (that is, the content of the categories was reviewed repeatedly and intensively) in an effort to understand the essence of the experience of participants.

In this report, we have sought to provide an account of the experience of Mormons seeking to cope with feelings of homosexual attraction. In an effort to provide the reader with a fuller understanding of the experience of research participants, we have relied heavily upon excerpts from interviews with the participants.

The degree to which this research approach relies on and is based on the perspective of participants is hopefully evident throughout this report. Although subjective judgment of the researchers played a role in the division of the data into categories and the final outline of the article, the reader will note in the comparison of the content of the article with the outline provided in the interview guide (Appendix A) that the major themes of this article and the sections into which this article is divided were not a priori concepts which we as researchers brought to the study, but were guided largely by the reported experience of the participants.
themselves. Aside from editing grammatical errors and, more rarely, rewording for brevity and clarity, the content of the quotes has been left in the words of participants.

The remainder of this article is divided into two sections. The first explores participants' descriptions of the challenges and struggles they have faced throughout their lives. The second explores their perception of developments or "transitions" which have helped them in their efforts to cope.

Challenges

Conceptualizing homosexuality as only a sexual issue, or even an issue of sexual identity, is a gross oversimplification. In addition to sexual attraction, arousal and behavioral patterns, there are a myriad of other difficult issues which must be faced by such individuals and those who wish to help them. The extraordinary struggles confronting such individuals complicate typical developmental tasks, often hindering efforts toward understanding oneself, developing a positive self-esteem, understanding God, and coping effectively in relationships with others. For a detailed account of the challenges they have faced, we now turn to the descriptions of participants.

Confusion, Guilt and Discouragement

The participants in our study reported that one of the challenges they faced was being confused by initial feelings of homosexual attraction.

- No one had ever really talked about sex period, let alone the possibility of abnormal sexual feelings, so I really didn’t know what I was going through.

- I didn’t understand this attraction to other males. I remember wondering in my early teens, “Why am I not more attracted to the girls?” It was very confusing to me, it was a feeling of “who am I really?”

- I do have memories through my childhood of thinking, “I’m different in some way—things are different for me,” but I wasn’t sure how. I really didn’t know what I was going
through. I figured, "Surely there's somebody else out there who could understand me."

• When I found myself attracted to men, I didn't know what was going on.

Confusion related not only to "what am I going through?" but, for some, "Why?"

• I felt like I had lived a good life, I was a good church member, I had always done what I was supposed to do, why was I going through this? I thought, "What have I done to bring this upon myself?" I was confused. How could I have the "sin of all sins" and yet I hadn't really done anything else that was really out of line of what the Church taught.

Often for years, participants could see no way out of their confusion. They perceived that there was little or no guidance available for coping with the issues of homosexuality they were experiencing.

• I didn't even know there was help available for someone dealing with this problem. I thought I was the only one dealing with this issue and there was nobody that could help me.

• Since the issue of homosexuality just wasn't talked about, there wasn't much guidance—Nobody told me what I was supposed to do and I didn't ask. No one suggested solutions, I don't think I ever heard an idea and said "this fits my problem, I'll try it."

• When it came to dealing with homosexual feelings, I didn't get any advise at all. No one said, "here's something you might try." I didn't hear a single word, not a single idea about how to cope with it.

• Growing up in the Church I heard all the talks about morality, and I never had a problem following those moral guidelines when I went out with guys. But when it came to relationships to other females, I didn't know where to draw a line. My common sense told me there should be a line, but I didn't understand where it was.
I always felt lost. I didn’t know where I was supposed to take my life. I thought, “My friends are going to grow up, they’re going to get married; what am I going to do when I grow up?—I don’t know what I’ll do!” I was living day by day and dealing with it day by day, I didn’t have anything in the future to work toward. It was so confusing, it was just hell.

I remember hearing a lot about repentance. And I distinctly remember feeling like I’d done something I needed to repent of and feeling incredible guilt, but I didn’t know how to repent of it. I wasn’t giving in to it, but I couldn’t make the feelings go away, and how do you repent of something that you can’t make stop? I remember hearing, “the answer to everything is in the scriptures,” but the answer to this sure wasn’t. Where was the answer as to how to repent of this? What was I supposed to do?

Participants also reported that they had a negative view of themselves. They questioned their self-worth and even God’s love for them. Feelings of guilt were common, even if they had never acted out.

When I was younger I saw myself as an innately bad person because of the feelings I was having.

I felt an incredible amount of guilt. The Church talked about homosexuality being the “sin of all sins,” and I guess I didn’t really understand that they meant acting upon those feelings or having those kinds of experiences was the sin. I never could find anything I had done that I could attribute those feelings to, but I still had all the guilt all the same.

I felt like the feelings which I had made me unworthy to even pray. When I prayed I would almost apologize for praying, for my unworthiness. I felt like I was a bad person and God had too many good people to worry about and that my prayers weren’t worth listening to. I thought God looked down at me for being the way I was.
Not only did participants report feeling guilty, they could see little hope for change in the future. To some participants, the future looked bleak.

- I had ruled out the possibility of getting married and having a family. It didn’t seem like a reality and it was easier to just not even hope for it. Before I came in for treatment, I just figured the day would come that I would give in and act sexually on the feelings. I didn’t want that type of lifestyle, but I figured I would eventually give in.

- Up until a year ago, I had pretty well given up and figured I was lost. I knew the Gospel was true, I just figured I couldn’t cut it. I knew the Second Coming of Christ was just around the corner and that my wife and family would be given to somebody else. That was not an easy time, I felt pretty lost.

Thoughts of suicide were not uncommon for participants.

- I was suicidal. I didn’t want to live because I feared what the future might bring. I was afraid of what I would become. As I looked at the options I thought were available, I didn’t feel like there was any possibility of a happy ending.

- I remember saying in my prayers, “if this is some kind of test, I give up. I didn’t pass, I just can’t do it.” I thought about suicide all the time. I didn’t want my life to turn out to be horrible, I didn’t want to ruin somebody else’s life, and I felt like if I got married I would ruin somebody’s life. I thought if I killed myself, then it would be over and my secret would just die with me.

One reason the future looked bleak to participants was that they had never seen nor heard of others who had coped with feelings of homosexual attraction as they hoped to:

- All you see are the people who act out, you don’t ever hear good stories. Who’s going to go tell their good story?—No way, they want to keep it quiet! If they’ve learned to deal with it or if they’re happy, they don’t go around telling everybody, they just want to put it behind them. But when bad things happen—somebody gets caught or something goes
wrong—then the world knows about it. This person I knew, got sent home from his mission for homosexuality. I heard stories like that all the time. But you never see anyone stand up at their mission homecoming and say, “I had struggles with these homosexual feelings but I resisted them my entire mission.” The heroic people you don’t see, you only see the negative.

Another factor which contributed to participants’ feelings of hopelessness was perceiving that there was no hope for change.

- I was told by the first psychologist I saw that my choices were to never give in to it and live my life alone, or to just give in to it. Neither option looked very good to me; I certainly didn’t want to live my life alone, but I didn’t want to live the gay lifestyle either.

- The world really tries to make you believe that it is impossible to avoid the gay lifestyle. The world tells you that you have to give in to it because those are your true feelings and those feelings define what you are and all you ever will be.

- These desires and feelings had always been there and I had accepted that they always would be there, and there was nothing I could do about it other than not to act on them. There didn’t seem to be anything I could do to mitigate them or to make them go away, so I adopted an attitude like I have toward my vision. I am near-sighted and I will be near-sighted until I die. There’s nothing I can do other than wear glasses or contact lenses. But I do believe that in the resurrection process my vision will be restored and no longer be defective.

Perception of God
Consistent with feelings of worthlessness and guilt, participants described viewing God as harsh and unforgiving.

- When I was younger I really did not have a positive attitude toward God. I saw Him as a vengeful being. When I started feeling homosexual feelings I thought “what kind of God would have me be like this but give me a command to get married and be happy and have children?”
• As a young teenager I thought that God looked down upon me because I was this horrible person, which is what I thought I was.

They also described being angry at God.

• All I could really feel toward him was anger. “Why me? Why would I have these feelings?” When I was really young, I thought, “What could I have done to deserve these feelings and why don’t you just change my feelings?” I didn’t feel like I deserved it. Later I pulled away from the Church. I didn’t understand what kind of a man would let me be this way. I didn’t see him as a loving father.

• I was raised in the Church so I grew up just believing in God because my parents did. And then when all these issues were coming up I just wondered, “how can it all be true?” I thought “if there was a God there would be more answers.”

Participants also reported being disenchanted with the Church.

• I had heard church leaders say that the answer to everything was supposed to be in the scriptures, well the answers about how to deal with homosexuality wasn’t, so then I figured they must have been wrong.

• I felt like I wasn’t a good church member anyway because I didn’t feel very worthy, even though I’d never acted out.

• I had a long, hard struggle with the Church. I wasn’t active in the Church during the critical years of adolescence and young manhood. One of the things that fueled my detachment from the Church was that I didn’t feel like there were men in the Church that I could trust—I’m sure there were, but I didn’t feel it. Remember the theory of “defensive detachment” (Moberly, 1983): I’m of the opinion that at the root of my homosexual attraction was the lack of positive, close male relationships when I was young, so that later I “detached” or avoided masculine relationships and activities even though they appealed to me. Somehow, without role-models for becoming masculine myself, the appeal of masculinity became sexualized. Well, my defensive detachment from authority figures and from men in general included men
in the Church. When it came to love and acceptance, I guess I had written the Church off as “They’re not my kind of folks. They’re strict and judgmental and down-the-line type guys.”

- I think I did finally say, “I haven’t done anything wrong and I didn’t do anything to bring these feelings upon myself.” Once I came to that realization, I was really angry. I felt like I had been lied to and I didn’t really want to have a whole lot to do with the Church.

Some participants attributed their early perception of God to their problematic relationship with their parents.

- I’ve heard it said—and it really fits with me—that men who have not had a good relationship with their own earthly fathers often don’t have a good relationship with their Heavenly Father.

- I believe that we develop a perception of God based on the way our parents are because that’s the kind of father and mother we know. Well, although we are really close now, when I was younger my parents were distant; I don’t have a lot of memories of closeness. I didn’t really have a close relationship with anyone so I really couldn’t really imagine a close relationship with my Heavenly Father.

**Relationships with Others**

Another difficulty reported by participants was the perceived differences between their own experience and the experience of their peers.

- I never acted on those feelings, and never would—I never even said anything. But it was just miserable because I knew I was different.

- I hate that I feel like I’m different. Growing up, I hated the fact that I was different. I thought, “Why are all my friends normal, why am I the one that has to go through this?”

- As a kid, I knew what everybody else was thinking and I could see that my experience was just the opposite. It was not the sexual nature of my thoughts that terrified me
because I wasn’t really thinking sexual thoughts at that age, it was more the difference I was beginning to recognize between me and my friends.

- My friends would talk about having a crush on this boy or that one, and while they were having crushes on guys I was having crushes on girls. I thought to myself, “Why are you feeling these things? What’s wrong with you?”

- In high school when you talk with your friends, people would say things like, “I can’t believe that anyone would want to have sex with a guy—that’s so sick.” I started feeling like, “This weirdo they are describing is me.” The differences between us became more obvious—the feelings I had weren’t the same feelings that they had.

Consistent with feeling unacceptable and different, participants also reported feeling that they were not a part of their peer group.

- I didn’t really ever fit in with “the group” as I was growing up. I guess I always felt like I was different. Maybe everybody feels that way because of insecurities about one thing or another, and maybe people saw me as just one of the group. I don’t know, but I always felt like I was kind of...just different. I really felt lonely a lot. Maybe it was something I did to myself; I’ve always liked to be alone. I think that even when I was with a group, sometimes I felt alone. I don’t think that it was necessarily hard to be in a group, I guess I just felt like no one could touch me when I was alone. Nobody can bother me, no one can hurt me. And I don’t have to prove myself to anybody.

- I had friends at school but never really a buddy. I just was not part of the team in school. I would come home from school and pretty much be on my own too—there were a few kids that I played with in the neighborhood but I don’t remember any close friends. So there were no close friendships at the school or at home. Actually, I probably could have been involved. People in the ward did reach out to me and tried to include me, but I avoided it. I was never
involved much in MIA or scouting—my brothers are eagle scouts, I think I made tenderfoot.

- In the sixth grade, I remember the boys out in the field doing things and I was usually with the girls playing jacks. I was never involved in sports. Participating in sports has been a real phobia for me. Any kind of the male activities, I wasn’t involved. I even remember the boys playing “squirrel,” where they would try to grab each other’s testicles. I was never involved in anything like that. I remember one of the girls telling me, “I’m glad you don’t do things like that.”

- I felt that I was deficient, defective, not part of the group. I began to try to compensate in other areas. I began to take up hobbies and do things that would make me stand out. It is interesting that I wanted to look exceptional because I was striving to become part of the group. I probably felt that there was something wrong with me, so I tried to go overboard the other way and make people think I was exceptional.

- On a mission you are automatically thrown into the group and I just didn’t fit in. The other missionaries would go off and play basketball and I would have to find an excuse to just sit there and watch. I remember trying to participate and backing into somebody and breaking their nose. It was always a traumatic experience, one to be avoided.

- I suppose other people may have seen me as fitting in with my peers, but I never felt like I fit in. I never saw myself as one of the guys when I was young, or as one of the men as I got older for that matter. I would have referred to myself as a “person” or a “professional,” but never as one of the “men.”

Not only did participants feel different from peers and excluded from the group, most reported that they thought they were unique and completely alone in their struggle.
• The entire time I was dealing with these feelings, up to the time I came in for therapy, I had no idea how common it was. I thought it was extremely rare.

• In junior high and early in high school I felt estranged, especially from the Church. I felt estranged from the whole wide world because I thought I was just an odd person having all of these different thoughts while everybody else must be going along normally.

• I think I was a little naive, thinking that I was one of very few people trying to deal with this problem.

Understandably, feelings of estrangement, along with the sensitive nature of the topic of sexuality, create a reluctance to disclose one’s struggle in an effort to seek help. Participants kept their struggle with feelings of homosexual attraction to themselves.

• Although we were close in my family, it is difficult in the Church to talk about any kind of sex education. Parents have a really tough time talking about it so they don’t say anything. Instead they say, “There is a book in the third drawer if you ever have any questions.” Well, if it’s not safe to talk about “normal” sexuality, then to walk up to my parents and say, “By the way let’s talk about these really unnatural thoughts I have been having...” Forget it! There was really nobody that I dared tell, and in fact I didn’t tell anyone for years and years.

• I had to keep it to myself because I worked for the Church and I knew I would lose my job as soon as it became known. With other problems you can go to your bishop and talk about it and the bishop will help you get it resolved, but I couldn’t do that because I knew I would immediately lose my job. That fear kept me from asking for help for many years. I really didn’t feel that there was anyone I could talk to about it.

• I was referred for counseling by a counselor at LDS Social Services, but was told that in order to do so I would have to talk to my bishop about it. At the time I didn’t know my bishop very well because I had just moved into a new ward,
and I wasn’t about to go to my old bishop whom I had known from birth. I mean it was hard enough to tell a total stranger, let alone someone I knew personally. So I didn’t go in for treatment at that time.

Participants remained silent out of a fear that their experiences would not be understood or accepted by others.

• I felt abandoned in the world. I thought, “Nobody knows what I’m going through, nobody could possibly understand.”

• I don’t think people recognize how much faith it would take to get something through this. I don’t envy people with physical disabilities, but at least people rally around them and they give them support. People recognize their faith and aren’t afraid to show them love. On the other hand, when you’re dealing with this issue there doesn’t seem to be any sympathy for any kind of suffering you may be experiencing. Some of the darkest, most absolutely horrid days of my life—times when I’ve truly considered suicide—there was nobody to call. I have had days where I have bawled and bawled and I have thought, “I need to tell someone, this is going to kill me” and I couldn’t because I was afraid no one would understand. I was afraid they would say, “You are disgusting.”

• It is a silent struggle that you go through. Rather than seeking support you try to hide your pain so people don’t usually recognize that you are troubled. They don’t understand what you’re going through and you don’t want to take five hours to explain it, so you just deal with it on your own.

Although the struggle with homosexuality is concealed in an attempt to protect oneself from ridicule and rejection, apparently concealment also has its costs. Participants reported feeling that by presenting a facade that was acceptable to others, they were living a double life.

• It’s like my whole life was a lie to cover that up. It determined the way I related to everybody.

• If you would have asked my bishop or any member of my ward they would have said I was an excellent church mem-
ber, I had callings of responsibility in the ward, yet I felt like I was going to hell. All my acquaintances would have given glowing reports of what a great individual I was, and that's exactly the way people saw me. I don't think other people had any idea what I was struggling with, or that I even had a struggle. Those of us who deal with this become very good at hiding it. It's a pretty lonely struggle.

• I was lacking integrity. And by that I mean I think I really was a person split—that my desires and some of my behavior was inconsistent. I mean, here I was married and having a good sexual relationship with my wife, but I was also sometimes alone and masturbating and thinking about men.

• Trying to live both lifestyles was very difficult, your personality can't do that. It's very difficult to try to be in lesbian lifestyle, and pull out and try to act, you know, like you're straight, or to go to church. It was just so intensely difficult for me, my mind couldn't deal with it. I went to church because I wanted to, but I couldn't even bear to sit there because it just racked me—I knew the Church was true the whole time. When I sat in church I was uncomfortable because of what I was doing, and when I was involved in the lifestyle I was uncomfortable because I really believed in the Gospel.

• It was really a split personality type thing that developed. I could work and function in church and do everything in one personality, and then if I had a chance to go to where gay men were, I would just shift into a totally different personality.

This secretiveness and lack of integrity requires a tremendous amount of effort. In a struggle to find some kind of release, two participants reported using drugs and/or alcohol.

• Smoking and the drinking appealed to me because they altered my consciousness and made me feel better. They medicated my bad feelings, my need to be connected.

• Early on I started drinking as an escape. I knew it was wrong, I knew it was against the Word of Wisdom—and this
is not an excuse—but it truly was more than I could take. I just couldn't deal with continually thinking I was a bad person. So I started to do anything I could to escape thinking about it.

Even when they kept their struggle with homosexual feelings to themselves, participants often reported that the attitudes of others toward homosexuality were often taken personally as judgment and rejection.

- Feedback that I was a bad person for having these homosexual feelings seemed to be coming from everyone, whether in the Church or just society in general. When I was young I really felt like it was me against the entire world. It's like the enemy is all around you (laughs). The basic goal was just to survive everyone's negative feedback, and if you can survive then happiness or anything else is like icing on the cake.

- I remember the comments of different Church authorities and people giving talks in church about morality, and homosexuality was always viewed as the worst possible thing. Well, I felt like they were pointing the finger at me. It took away my hope—if you can't feel like a worthwhile person in the eyes of the Lord, you are in deep trouble.

- My mom felt that homosexuality was just this grotesque, horrible sin, and she talked about it like it was almost impossible to repent of. I remember her reaction to this friend of the family that was gay. She completely shunned him, never spoke to him. Maybe some of that was anger that he had done his wife wrong by going out on her, but to me it seemed like she hated him because of what he was. So here I was, saying to myself, "That's what I am. If anybody really knew, I would be shunned. If my friends knew, they would hate me. If my family knew, they would disown me."

- It's hard to take when people talk negatively about homosexuals. It is something that is a part of you and so it makes you feel like an idiot. You think, "I don't know how I could be this way either but I am."
• In a talk, one of the brethren said that homosexuality is the result of selfishness—he didn’t say “homosexual behavior,” he said “homosexuality.” It really made me mad. I thought, “I have been trying to serve others my whole life, I went on a perfectly honorable mission, and the reason I’m cursed with this issue is because I’m selfish?” That was really hard for me. I was furious.

In addition, in an effort to keep others from learning about their feelings of homosexual attraction, individuals may go to the extreme of avoiding even socially acceptable expressions of physical touch and affection with members of the same sex out of fear that others might “see through” their heterosexual facade.

• Irrationally, I always thought that other men who don’t have this problem can see through those of us who are trying to hide it. So I always approached other men with a little bit of caution and was hesitant to be too friendly to other men. And I was always pretty paranoid about touch. If some other guy would come up and put his arm around me, I didn’t like that. I thought, “Is he teasing me? Is he doing this to rattle my chain because he knows what’s going on?”

• It’s funny, when you grow up with these same-sex attraction feelings you are terrified to touch someone of the same sex because for some reason you think, “the minute I even brush up against a girl everybody is going to know, so I will just avoid physical contact.” And yet you have these two straight girl cheerleaders who are holding hands skipping down the hall, arms around each other and they don’t think a thing about it. That’s got to be emotionally fulfilling for them.

In summary, people struggling with homosexuality are faced with many challenges. Participants in our study described initially feeling confused and seeing no method for gaining increased understanding. They also experienced feelings of worthlessness, guilt, and questioned God’s love for them. To some participants, the future looked bleak, and they saw little potential for change in their lives. They perceived God as harsh and unloving, and reported being angry at God and disenchanted with the Church.
The social arena presents particular challenges for those experiencing feelings of homosexual attraction. They may have perceived, often beginning at a young age, that they are different from their peers, that they fail to fit in with their peer group, and that they are alone in their attraction for members of the same sex. Understandably, those we interviewed kept their feelings to themselves, often for years rather than disclosing them to others in an effort to seek help, in part because they feared rejection.

However, concealing their feelings of homosexual attraction is not a perfect solution. Living with this secret made participants feel as though they had to live a double life. Furthermore, others often voice negative and judgmental attitudes toward homosexuality—the individual’s struggle may have remained a secret, but painful and injurious feedback has been received nonetheless. Finally, the individual may forego positive, non-erotic same-sex relationships out of fear of his or her homosexuality being discovered.

**Key Transitions**

Participants described a number of important developments which helped them deal with the issues of homosexuality. Although conceptualized here as “transitions,” we emphasize that these developments are often complex combinations of changes in relationships, shifts in perception, and engagement in new behavioral patterns, rather than single, discreet “steps” toward dealing with the issue of homosexuality more effectively. The division of the “transitions” in the lives of participants into separate subheadings is simply a tool of convenience for the purpose of making a large body of data more comprehensible; we do not presume that such separations represent separable realities in the lives of the participants. In reality, we assume that the factors which are discussed below are mutually dependent and that they intermingle to form a complex working system.

Furthermore, as Dallas (1991) points out, it is more accurate to conceptualize growth in the lives of such individuals as a process of change rather than a single transformation. In discussing previous
changes and growth, participants were quick to point out that development is ongoing in their lives.

With these caveats in mind, we now move on to explore the developments or transitions which participants in our study described as helpful in their attempts to deal with issues of homosexuality. First, we cover the difficult and risky transition of disclosing one’s struggle to others and developing positive and supportive interpersonal relationships. Second, we explore the often dramatic and revolutionary transition to increased knowledge and understanding. Thirdly, we then discuss the nature and impact of participants’ changing relationship with and perception of God. Finally, transitions regarding issues of sexuality and gender are explored.

Developing Intimacy Through Sharing with Others

Although initial fear of rejection made it very difficult, those we interviewed said they eventually reached a point where they opened up to someone else about this issue, perhaps a close friend, a family member, a therapist, or an ecclesiastical leader.

Participants described telling others as a great risk, which was extremely difficult to take.

- Eventually I gathered my courage and showed my face at LDS Social Services to participate in my first group therapy meeting. It was hard to get myself there. I had diarrhea all day long that day at work I was so worried, but I felt that it was something I had to do.
- The first time I went into the psychologist’s office, I wouldn’t even bring up the topic. Finally he started asking questions. When he came around to the topic of homosexuality I told him, “that’s what I’m struggling with.” That was the first I’d ever told anyone. It was hard because I was still feeling like I was this bad person.
- I was very reluctant to go to LDS Social Services and participate in group therapy. I’d never met another man who I knew was dealing with the problem and I had always been afraid that “Gee, I’ll be with somebody else who has the
problem and we will not be able to control ourselves and it will end in sex.”

Before taking the step of opening up to others, participants described doing everything they could to minimize the risk involved. Disclosure is easier to those who demonstrate that their love and support is unconditional before they ever hear about the issue.

• My friend was pretty open-minded and I felt like she would accept it. Even if she couldn't, I didn’t feel like it would be damaging to tell her because I knew she wouldn’t tell others.

• The bishop had no idea what I was going to tell him, but he showed me love from the minute I walked in the door. We sat there for an hour while I tried to get it out, and by that time his love and patience showed me that he was going to love me no matter what I had to say.

• I knew the guy I told would never tell a soul, I knew him that well. I knew that he’d never use it against me—even if it didn’t work out between us he wouldn’t drag me through it after.

• It was a risk to tell my dad, but by the time I told him I saw that he had true love for me. He was a very busy man, but he took time to take me shopping and out to lunch on the spur of the moment. As we spent time together, his actions clearly showed that he would handle it very well and still love me, so he became a safe person.

Working on issues of homosexuality will always involve some social risk, however, and participants had to reach a point where they were willing to take those risks.

• To me, the problem itself was much more stressful than therapy. Feeling these feelings and feeling stuck, like there was no escape. Not dealing with it brought a cloud over things. Treatment was clearly a great alternative to what the past had been.

• Going into therapy I had fears about my identity becoming known. I was paranoid about sitting in a lobby and having
someone walking in and say, "I know why you're here." But I guess as I became more sure of who I was and I became less homophobic, it was OK for me to realize that if somebody else found out it wouldn't be the end of the world.

The fears of some participants were, at least in part, realized. Some people did react negatively when told.

- My wife felt a tremendous sense of betrayal when I told her. Even though I've never been unfaithful to her, she wondered how I could have been in her life so long while keeping something so important from her. Even now, my wife views homosexuality as a repugnant subject. She doesn't want to talk about it, even though that means we can't communicate about all the discoveries and progress I see as so important.

- My relationship with my extended family is cordial, but it is not nearly as close as it was before they knew. On one hand, I feel a sense of rage because their reaction seems unjust. But on the other hand, I'm trying to see it from their perspective—it must have been an incredible shock.

In spite of the risks and difficulties, disclosing one's struggle brought numerous positive results as well. Participants were usually surprised to learn that others would still accept and love them, even after learning that they were dealing with feelings of homosexual attraction. Then they are more able to feel loved for who they truly are, rather than for the facade they had tried to present.

- The first person I told was a close friend. She didn't react at all the way I thought she would. I guess I was expecting rejection, but it didn't even phase her. She didn't think I was a bad person or anything! And we are still really close.

- The first person I told was a counselor. I expected him to be very judgmental but he was actually very accepting.

- It was really a positive experience to tell my friend because I finally saw that people—your friends at least—can see you for who you are, can know about it, and still not look down at you because of it.
• I told my wife—my fiancé at the time. It was hard for her to hear. Eventually she asked, “Well, what does it mean for us?” And I said, “It doesn’t change anything, I intend to marry you and be faithful my whole life.” In the end she said, “I can’t believe you have gone through this for years and felt like you were alone. You won’t ever have to go through this alone again. Now this is our problem and we will get through it together.” That made all the difference in the world to me.

• The bishop told me that what I had done was wrong, he made it clear what I had to do to repent, but then he went on to the importance of self-worth and the love he had to give me.

The acceptance of others may force a change in one’s self-perception. When the disclosure of the “deep, dark secret” of homosexuality doesn’t lead to the feared rejection, it’s more difficult to see oneself as abnormal or weird.

• I was surprised by the attitude my therapist had toward it. I was totally embarrassed to talk about it, but he was open about it. He acted like it wasn’t something that I should be ashamed of or embarrassed to talk about. One of the biggest surprises was that he seemed to feel that the way I had dealt with it was natural and normal. That was an eye-opener for me because I had always figured that I had dealt with it totally wrong, that I had committed some terrible sin to bring it upon myself.

• The fact that my friend knew what I was going through and accepted it changed the way I looked at it. It made me think, “I am not so different, I am not weird.”

• I guess I used to identify all these issues exclusively with homosexuality, and now I don’t. Now I think they’re just part of being a person on this planet. Now I view myself as a normal person having normal reactions.

Two participants made a direct connection between disclosing their struggle to others and a notable decrease in the intensity of sexual urges.
• I can’t believe how much it has helped to open up to my friends. It’s not nearly as much of a problem as it was before, I don’t think about it as much.

• When I talk about it, it’s not as strong. Instead of a secret I keep hidden, something I’m embarrassed about and never dare bring up, being open about it has made it less of a problem.

Once struggles have been shared with others, there is no longer a need to “pretend” or “live a double-life” around those people. One participant described opening up to others—dropping his facade—as the event which finally allowed integration of previously separate parts of himself.

• The first time I went to the support group, they had us introduce ourselves. When it came time for me to actually speak, I had a strange experience. I know this will sound a little crazy, but I had almost an out of body experience as I started talking. I had taken the book *You Don’t Have to Be Gay* (Konrad, 1987) and put the cover of an electronics catalogue on it so that I would feel comfortable reading it in public. I said “I’m a lot like this book. On the outside I appear to be a very straight individual. None of my family and none of my friends know but on the inside I’m struggling with homosexuality.” I remember, as I said those words, it was not like I was saying those words. It was like I was sitting next to myself and I could hear this person saying these words but it didn’t feel like me. That was such a vivid experience. I think that something really good—but hard—happened there, for I had to come together and integrate by saying it out loud to this group of men I didn’t know. It was like I was really admitting something and really breaking down a wall. I had compartmentalized these feelings for so many years that they really weren’t a part of my conscious identity, the part of me that would speak out.

A willingness to open up and seek help also created opportunities for participants to meet others who were dealing with similar
issues. Participants now had first-hand evidence that they were not alone in their struggle.

- I remember really praying intensely at the beginning of treatment that I would be able to meet just one man in this process who would be on my level, someone who I would be able to relate to and who would be able to guide me through all this. Well, I can truly say “my cup runneth over,” because I met more than a dozen men who became my friends and helped me.

- It was such a relief to hear others say, “Oh, you felt like that too? You went through that too?” I had always assumed no one could understand what I was going through.

Not only did participants see that they were not alone, meeting others with similar struggles also helped counter the negative stereotypes about what individuals dealing with homosexuality are like.

- My first meeting with the LDS Social Services therapy group I was really quite amazed to see that the other men there didn’t have chandeliers hanging from their ears. By all outward appearances they seemed to just be normal guys like me, so I felt pretty comfortable with them right from the start.

Once others in their lives knew, they were able to provide participants with support in their struggles.

- I’ve struggled with depression—my wife picked up a tape on depression. When I was really going through some difficult times and had to go on a business trip, she bought a Church music tape for me to listen to and that made all the difference in the world.

- The group is a place where it’s safe to share what you’re struggling with. All the other members have been there so they are very supportive.

- Trying to be open with my wife is not easy, but it has helped a lot. In the past it’s been hard for me to express emotions to her—I could tell her the events of the day but I couldn’t
tell her my feelings. I'm working on that and we're really sharing in the growth I'm making now. She has had to sacrifice time together as I've worked on some of these issues, but she realizes that it's for the benefit of our future and she supports me in the things I'm trying to do.

One participant described how, in addition to moral support, he unexpectedly received helpful information from a knowledgeable friend.

- The counselor I had met said I would never change and I might as well give in to it, so I had come to a dead end and had pretty much given up trying to change. But when I told this friend, he knew a lot about the subject of homosexuality. He had studied up on the issue to help other friends who were dealing with it. We talked and prayed about it a lot. He talked me into seeking help again and helped me get in touch with LDS Social Services.

To summarize, a great deal of courage is required to share such a difficult and socially unacceptable issue with others. For participants in our study, however, many benefits resulted when they took the risk. As a result of sharing their struggle with others, many of their perceptions about how they fit into their social world, discussed earlier, had to be revised. They saw that others could still love and accept them in spite of the issue, they began to feel that maybe they weren't all that different or abnormal, they were faced with evidence that they are not alone in their struggle, and they became aware of the distorted nature of popular perceptions of individuals dealing with homosexuality.

**Acquiring Increased Understanding**

As noted in the first section of this article, one of the challenges described by participants was the experience of confusion. Note the powerful impact learning can have, as illustrated in the following excerpts (italicized emphases are ours).

- One big turning point for me was when I read an article by Tom and Ann Pritt (1987).
- My greatest discovery has been learning the dynamics of defensive detachment (Moberly, 1983).
• I received the Moberly (1983) and Konrad (1987) books from a gentleman in Evergreen. For two or three days I read them continually until I got through them. And I had an experience reading those books like some people have when they read the Book of Mormon, where they just become totally absorbed in it and it rings true and they say, “This is the true religion!”

• Because of what I learned, I was very relieved when I walked out of the first meeting with my counselor.

• The most important thing for me was learning that there is help available for this kind of a problem.

It appears that the important thing for participants in our study was not necessarily learning indisputable “facts” about homosexuality, but learning ideas that helped them make sense of their own experience or see things in a new and different way. In fact, the ideas which were particularly meaningful differed from participant to participant.

For some participants, learning to distinguish uninvited feelings of homosexual attraction from “sinful” behavior had the greatest impact.

• It’s a huge turn around to go from feeling vile and disgusting to feeling like “I’m of value and Heavenly Father has a plan for me.” And a lot of that turn around came from just learning that homosexual feelings are not an innately bad thing, it’s what you do with them that matters.

• The real key was when I separated the feelings from the behavior and figured out, “OK, having those feelings doesn’t mean you’re evil. You are a good person.” Then I could give myself that wholeness, I could say, “I am attracted to members of the same sex and I’m a good person. It doesn’t have to be one or the other anymore. Everybody around you who thinks you’re a good person, they’re right, they’re not just making this up.” You get a lot of your worth back because it allows you dignity.

• When I would hear, “you’re wrong for being a being attracted to members of the same sex, those very desires are sinful,”
I wasn’t very motivated to try to control my behavior because I felt I was already in the depths of sin before I’d ever done a thing, simply because of this attraction that seemed to come naturally. So when someone pointed out more accurately what I do have power over, it gave me back control over my life. They said, “you don’t have control over who you’re attracted to; you can control your thoughts and your behavior.”

- I thought that I was really committing a sin simply by having those feelings. I didn’t understand that having those feelings wasn’t a sin, and of course no one told me it wasn’t because nobody knew I was going through those things—I wasn’t about to tell anyone. So even though I didn’t know why I was having those feelings I felt like, “I must have done something, but if I have sinned I don’t know what I’ve done.” I found myself searching for what that was, because whatever it was, I wanted to undo it. I think the confusion resulted from the fact that when they talk about heterosexual immorality—fornication and adultery—they spell out that those feelings and desires are normal, it’s the behavior that is sinful. But then when they talk about homosexuality, it’s just evil in itself. There’s no differentiation, they just group it all together. It’s homosexuality—the entire thing—that’s the sin.

For some participants, an important “truth” was a confirmation that feelings of homosexual attraction are not necessarily chosen.

- When I first went in to see a counselor, we talked about “Who is really responsible for you being this way? How did it happen?” We talked about several different possibilities. His idea was that it was all biological, he talked about it like a birth defect. But he said there was also a possibility that it was something that happens in early childhood. Either way, it reinforced something I had been feeling for years: I didn’t choose to be this way, it wasn’t something I brought upon myself. It was a relief to hear someone say, “we don’t know exactly what causes this, but it’s certainly not your fault.”
A greater understanding of Gospel truths was described as important by some.

- Once I gained a greater understanding about the pre-existence, I realized that the very fact that you’re on the earth with a mortal body shows your valiancy. And I learned other signs of valiancy from my patriarchal blessing. When you learn about who you are and the reason we’re here, you start to realize that you’re a good person. The Gospel teaches you that sense of self-worth, and Heavenly Father, in his own way, has told me, “You’re valuable to me.”

- Throughout the proceedings of the disciplinary council, the Bishop and Stake President have done a lot to help me. I have also felt God’s involvement in my life. That’s new for me because as I grew up, I always thought the Church was an organization where I would find out how to serve other people—I had never thought of the Church or of God as a source of help for me.

Learning about psychological theory played a role for some. One participant described the importance of learning about theories which conceptualize homosexuality as a drive to compensate for historically inadequate same-sex relationships.

- When I read the books and realized that a desire for physical contact with members of the same sex was normal and that they aren’t necessarily “homosexual,” I thought, “I’m OK!” And the desires that I have felt to be with other men aren’t sexual! They’re related to my need to have this little kid in me grow up and to have appropriate fathering and appropriate male-bonding. I have a hard time explaining to you how wonderful and how liberating this was.

- The books that were most helpful to me suggest that appropriate same-sex relationships can meet the emotional needs which have previously been sexualized. And what I experienced as I read these books was, “This is exactly what has happened to me! This explains why I have these good experiences with my Elders quorum—I was doing male bonding, I was repairing something. This explains why I was
so attracted to males—I needed good relationships with men.” In the absence of appropriate positive relationships I was hurting, there was a hole in me that needed to be filled. And I mistakenly thought that I could help myself or make myself feel better by reacting to these situations sexually. And ohhhh, it was a tremendous experience to read these books and agree with them and say “Aha! This is what’s been going on!”

This participant also described how such knowledge brought power.

- That discovery relieved a tremendous amount of anxiety and freed in me a tremendous amount of energy. When I became aware that I was avoiding involvement in appropriate and normal male relationships and activities because I was afraid of them, and that to develop like I wanted to I would have to override that fear and get involved anyway, that allowed me to go through a really scary process of getting involved in group therapy and walking out on that baseball field for the first time. I realized that I had defensively detached from anything athletic because that was a way of avoiding pain. Yet I was causing more pain by avoiding it and thereby isolating myself from something that most American men use as a pretty basic part of their identity as men—just look at the number of times sports are mentioned in any given General Priesthood Meeting!

In summary, gaining increased knowledge, both of psychological theories of homosexuality and of Gospel truths, helped participants gain perspective and understanding about what they were going through. Increased understanding led to less self-blame, and a more realistic perception of what they could do to deal effectively with their struggle.

**Developing a Relationship with a Loving God**

Very important to many participants in the process of trying to deal with issues of homosexuality was a change in their perception of God. Rather than a harsh or distant figure, God came to be
viewed as a loving father on whom one could rely. Some also felt that their relationship with God changed.

- I had always seen God as somebody who would just let me suffer and go through all these things and never help me. But the emphasis in my patriarchal blessing was how much Heavenly Father loved and missed me. I knew he could see what I was doing, and I had done quite a few things that were wrong, so when I was told in my blessing that he loved me that meant a lot. I did a 180 degree turn at that point. I said “forget the lesbian lifestyle and everything that goes with it because God loves me. That is much more than all of this put together.”

- It has been rewarding, although difficult, to try to develop a relationship with my Father in Heaven. Prayer’s been very difficult for me in the past. Now, in addition to my morning and nightly prayers, I try to have a personal conversation with Heavenly Father on the morning hikes I take. It helps me see God as loving and close, rather than a distant authority figure.

One participant’s reliance on God helped meet the emotional needs which previously drove her toward involvement in erotic same-sex relationships.

- Ultimately, I think meeting those needs that I used to try to meet through sexual involvement has been a spiritual thing. Heavenly Father is the one who can change your heart and fill you up where you’re lacking, so I tried to keep in close touch with Him all of the time.

One participant felt that improvement in her relationship with her earthly father was a key to her changing perception of God.

- My dad took serious interest in me when I began drinking and taking drugs. I don’t know why we didn’t have that kind of closeness earlier, but all of a sudden he started showing me tremendous affection and love. Then I could see what a loving father was like, and I had something to identify God with.
Feeling love from Heavenly Father provided participants with an increased sense of self-worth.

- The biggest secret is finding out for yourself that Heavenly Father values you, that gives you more strength than anything. You can get outside sources all the time but once it comes directly from Heavenly Father, it’s powerful and it becomes a real anchor.

- Since I had heard horror stories about homosexual missionaries trying things on their companions, I was really questioning whether a mission was the right thing for me. One night shortly before my mission, I had been praying for hours, and in the middle of the night I finally got an answer. I was overcome, I felt God’s love for me stronger than I had ever felt anything in my life. The peace I felt is indescribable, and I knew everything would be all right if I tried to serve him. I had always thought God looked down on me, but after that prayer, I think for the first time, I didn’t feel that way. I think for the first time I felt like I wasn’t a horrible person and God really loved me and cared what happened to me.

Once the individual feels love from God and the deeper sense of self-worth it brings, negative feedback from others diminishes in power.

- Once you get a spiritual understanding, revelation of who you are, then all of the stupidity and the rudeness becomes less important. Now people can say derisive things and I just dismiss them.

In summary, a revolutionary change in one’s perception of and relationship with God was a key factor for some participants. There appears to be a perceptual shift from viewing God as cold and uncaring, to viewing God as a loving Father who is acting in one’s best interest.

**Issues of Sexuality and Gender**

We have made the point that homosexuality ought not to be conceptualized as a sexual issue exclusively. Within the context of the other areas we have discussed, however, issues of gender and
sexuality certainly abound. The hopelessness and desperation discussed in the first section of this article often related to participants' fear that they would never be able to rid themselves of their attraction to members of the same sex. However, throughout the process of trying to deal with this issue, participants reported gaining hope for positive development and change in their lives.

- Before coming to LDS Social Services, everything that I ever read taught that it is impossible to change. I always figured it must be possible—if Satan is trying that hard to convince me that it isn’t, then it must be.

- I was very comforted during the disciplinary council at the time I was disfellowshipped. I had been lost, but I then knew that was no longer true. I knew that things would work out and I broke down sobbing. I now know that things will work out. That’s probably the vision that’s been so important in the last nine months. If I were to die today I would be in good shape.

- The counselor at LDS Social Services asked me what my plans were. I told him the most important thing to me was getting married and having a family and I asked him if that was a possibility. He said, “I think your chances of having a happy family are good.” He really gave me hope. I remember getting off the phone and I’d never been so excited in my life. He made me feel like it was something I could deal with. He gave me hope that I might not turn out to be a disaster case. That was the first good thing I had ever heard about it.

Participants reported that their sexual urges have less control over their lives: they experience them less often and they have developed ways to cope with them when they do occur.

- Those feelings are weaker now, I don’t feel that as strongly any more. Now when I have those feelings I understand them and know how to deal with them, they aren’t overwhelming. I don’t feel like this is over, but I have beat this thing in a very big way. I make decisions about what I am going to do and I’m in control of my life.
• As I began to do those things I am supposed to do and began to rely totally on my Heavenly Father and avoid the negative things, the needs just began to subside. People who are trying to pull out of the lifestyle need to know that it takes time. But you do get to the point where the need is not that strong. Time will heal.

• The feelings of sexual attraction used to be more intense. Now it's not as big a deal because I know what I'm about. If I see somebody with bulging biceps and a great beard, I can immediately process that and say, “Well gee, do I want to have thicker facial hair or do I want to have a better upper body build—am I feeling some envy there?” It's not like a chemical reaction that just overwhelms me anymore.

• Before, I experienced sexual attractions all the time, I thought about it a lot. Now, sure, I can still be attracted, but it doesn’t bother me as much. I feel like I can deal with it. I know that having a physical relationship with a man is not really what I want, I would rather have a physical relationship with my wife.

• If you’re always “white-knuckling,” always seeking to be in tight control of things—“I’d better not even think this thought”—the paradox is that you’re not in control. And if you can relax and just flow with things and be philosophical and laid back and see the humor, that is real control, that’s when you’re really more in charge of yourself.

Participants reported discovering that the deep and compelling needs that drove them toward sexual involvement have not been removed, nor need they be denied. Instead, they have found that positive, non-sexual relationships can meet their needs for acceptance, love and emotional intimacy.

• I have not felt an intense need for sexual involvement for a while. There are a number of things that have contributed to that. In my new ward I have friendships with “straight” females. We get together and laugh and talk. That association with them helps fill my needs. I also have a really close friend who has this tendency but who is not at all involved
in the lesbian lifestyle, and when I need to talk about this subject, I can talk to her. We are both doing what is right and it’s a supportive relationship.

• There have been times when I have been “white-knuckling” it and trying to force it out of my mind. But then there have been other times when I have been trying to deal with friendships and relationships, and during those periods it is not a problem, I don’t have to struggle with it. It’s like, I need to get the closeness one way or another, if I don’t get it the right way then the sexual desires become stronger.

• Since I have been involved with Evergreen and formed relationships there, there is no desire to act out. I sometimes notice good-looking guys, but there is no desire to get involved sexually.

This is a change for participants, who may have previously attempted to fill emotional voids through involvement in pathological, even dangerous same-sex relationships.

• There were all kinds of problems in my relationships. I think I was trying to fill some emotional needs, but it was as though they just were not fillable. It was like a bottomless pit. No relationship was enough to fill those needs. I couldn’t deal with my needs in a logical way either, I would just let them take over and take control. Those needs would drive my every thought and action.

• The week I heard of my sister’s death, I became involved in another sexual relationship. I was in grief, but the only way I knew to express emotion, any emotion, was through sex.

• I was a wreck. I was beat up a number of times, but I would beg her to come back because I was so desperate to have that feeling of emotional security. I was not safe physically but the needs were being filled. It makes me sick to think about now, but I would have rather been beat up every two weeks than lose someone who could meet those needs. I was so desperate I would go through anything.

Some of the males we interviewed reported increasing feelings of masculinity and a deepening identity as a man. These feelings
were linked with the development of positive, non-sexual relationships with other men.

• Since I have developed stronger appropriate relationships with men, I feel more masculine myself. And I can truthfully say that I’m finding more sexual desire for my wife. It’s exciting, this is the first that the desire has been there—before it was always to perform for her benefit.

• Now I’m experiencing a drive to develop positive relationships with males, relationships that I haven’t always had the benefit of in my life. It feels good to develop positive relationships, knowing that they aren’t sexual, that I don’t have any desire in my heart other than to have a wholesome, man-to-man relationship.

For some, involvement in sports played a profound role in the development of increased feelings of masculinity.

• My first experiences in group and playing ball were the first time in my life that I have felt a sense of total acceptance. And for the first time in my life I began to somehow see myself on an equal footing with all men. I never had a sense of being female, I’m guessing that I just never developed the degree of maturity and manhood that other boys develop normally as they grow up. I think I always kind of saw myself as a little kid walking around in a man’s body. Maybe not even a man’s body—I saw myself as a little kid pretending to be a man. I was always looking over my shoulder and saying “Is this act working?” When I used to drive by the high school and see guys out there playing softball, I felt alienated from them. These feelings really had changed almost overnight, just within a few weeks of playing ball and going to group therapy. I saw myself as a man and I felt good about myself. I looked at other men and somehow they didn’t seem quite as intimidating or as big or unapproachable. I can remember driving by, again seeing some high school kids out playing ball, and thinking, “well I’m just like them.” I may be twenty years older than them but they are just guys and I’m a guy too. All of a sudden I
didn’t have to act, I just thought “I’m okay, I’m a man.” I felt connectedness with the whole world of men. Suddenly I felt at home in my own skin. Then I felt more comfortable not only in the sport’s group but with men in general—I felt more comfortable with the guys I work with and I felt more at home in my Elder’s Quorum.

- If you don’t have this deficit you probably take for granted these good experiences like being with your kids or being with other guys and talking about sports or throwing the ball around. If you’ve grown up where sports are just a normal part of your life, it’s hard to conceive of how uncomfortable this is, as a boy and as a man, to not feel like you fit into this world. For many years I was detached from the sports scene and it was painful for me. It limited the amount of support I was able to give my kids. There was a time when just going to see my oldest boy play T-ball was extremely uncomfortable for me. I think I only went twice, and all the other times my wife had to take him. I’m grateful because Dan Gray’s sports program really worked for me. It has really been like the difference between night and day, now I can feel OK about myself as a guy who knows a little bit about sports and, more than that, is comfortable with other men and their sports. I feel so much more adequate as a father. Now I’m much more comfortable going out to play basketball in the driveway or toss a football or baseball around on the lawn. Maybe it sounds trivial, but it opened up a whole new world for me that many other people might take for granted.

- In the groups and in sports there was a lot of healthy touch. There was a lot of slapping backs and high-fives and physical touching that I had always been uncomfortable with. After a few weeks my discomfort melted away and as I looked around me and I felt like I had new eyes and I began to understand that the unspoken rule of straight men is to touch all the time. I had always been blind to that and I always felt weird being touched. It was great to realize that I could be touched and it wasn’t necessarily sexual; I could touch
without it being sexual. I don't know why I hadn't been able
to see it before, but this was really the way straight people
behaved.

Perhaps since some men felt at one time that they were "acting
the part" of a man and had to cover up their inadequacies,
increased feelings of masculinity may contribute to the freedom to
be oneself, as described by one participant.

- I have become much more spontaneous. I kid around much
more. I feel more comfortable with myself and consequently
I have a newfound freedom to be myself with others. I don't
quite know how to describe it but my body image changed
too. I had always hated to go shopping, it had always just
been an uncomfortable ordeal for me to try on clothes and
stand and look in the mirror. I remember the first time I
went shopping since really working on this issue, and I had
fun trying on clothes. I was much more bold in colors and
my wife said, "you always used to go to the most conservative
thing on the rack." Before I wanted to be invisible, I wanted
to blend into the crowd. Now suddenly it was okay to be
me.

It is with satisfaction, even excitement, that participants and
others in their lives witness these changes.

- I never thought I'd be happy. I wish then I would have
known how happy I would be now, it would have made it a
lot easier for me to get through the difficult times.

- In the last few years I have gone through intense spiritual
progress, I have come a long way. I would not say I am
completely over it but I have made 150 percent progress from
five years ago.

- Although my wife was extremely uncomfortable with me
being with men who had the problem, she now feels that my
self-image, as far as my ability to be in sports situations and
to just be a normal father, has changed in a positive way.

- It was a tremendous feeling of relief to see that my life could
improve, because prior to that I had always assumed I would
live with it and maybe if I was good, in the hereafter I would
be healed. Suddenly, when things were getting better, I just said "aahh, thank you." To me it was a direct answer to prayer. My prayers for growth and development are being answered. It is wonderful.

- There have been some undeniable changes. You have experiences where you think "aha!" or your therapist says, "did you hear what you just said? Do you realize what a shift that is?"

In summary, the individuals who participated in our study moved from feeling like the future was hopeless and bleak to developing hope and optimism for change in their lives. Participants described developing fulfilling, well-rounded relationships in which emotional needs could be met in non-sexual ways. This was a change for participants who had previously attempted to deny their needs or meet them through sexual involvement. Some of the males in our study reported increased feelings of masculinity, often in conjunction with the development of relationships and involvement in sports with other men. Understandably, participants are excited about the positive changes in their lives.

Discussion

For the most part, throughout this article we have allowed the reports of participants to stand on their own. At this point, however, it may be helpful to provide a summary of the implications of this research for those seeking to help individuals struggling with issues of homosexuality. The following themes, which permeate this article, appear worthy of emphasis:

(1) The variety and complexity of the issues discussed by participants suggest that non-sexual issues must receive appropriate emphasis. To therapists, this means exploring the non-sexual issues identified by clients, as well as the non-sexual context and motiva-

---

3A comprehensive theoretical treatment of the issues raised by participants is beyond the scope of this article. For a more complete theoretical integration of many of the concepts mentioned here and their implications for treatment, see Pritt & Pritt (1987) and Nicolosi (1991).
tion for sexual behavior. Work on relationships is paramount for many. Ecclesiastical leaders must recognize that "sin" is not the individuals only problem; just as crucial as—and perhaps requisite to—avoiding sinful homosexual behavior, the individual must develop in his or her understanding, personal identity, interpersonal relationships and relationship with God.

(2) The ability to help one struggling with issues of homosexuality depends largely on that individual's perception of the potential helper's attitude. Participants only sought help when they anticipated that their disclosure would meet with acceptance. Acceptance and unconditional love appear to be much more important than the helper's knowledge concerning the topic of homosexuality.

(3) Avoidance of and secretiveness regarding issues of sexuality in general and homosexuality specifically present obstacles to individuals struggling with these issues. Perceived or actual avoidance, fear, disgust, ridicule and disparagement all perpetuate the spiraling cycle of increased secretiveness and the perception of oneself as unacceptable.

(4) Issues regarding authority play a key role, as evidenced by previous and ongoing relationship with parents, God, and other authority figures. Individuals in positions of authority, such as parents, therapists and ecclesiastical leaders may unwittingly trigger feelings of anxiety and resultant responses of avoidance and detachment. Helpers who de-emphasize authority, power, and the hierarchical nature of relationships and emphasize love, equality and reciprocity are more likely to be effective with these individuals.

(5) Because of feelings of guilt, depression and hopelessness, those in a position to help individuals struggling with homosexuality must be alert to the very real possibility of suicidal thoughts and behavior.

(6) Concerning the nature of change: for those dealing with this issue, progress and development often come in unexpected ways. Early on in the process of trying to cope, participants anticipated that they would have to rid themselves of hidden and unacceptable aspects of their nature, or at least choose between seemingly incongruous parts of themselves. Participants also felt
that they required increased will-power to continue to deny compelling needs. In actuality, participants come to see that seemingly incompatible aspects of their identity can be integrated, that the seemingly shameful parts of themselves are normal and may be accepted by others in their lives, and that strong needs can be met in unexpected, non-sexual ways, rather than denied. In sum, rather than becoming something or someone new, they are able to be themselves more completely, consistently, and comfortably.

(7) Finally, it is worthy of note that, in spite of the unsettled nature of the debate regarding homosexuality's cause, lifestyle is certainly a matter of choice. The individual struggling with feelings of homosexual attraction is faced with the developmental task of seeking to understand and integrate seemingly incongruous parts of him or herself. In facing such a task, the individual begins with various "givens" such as sexual attractions, social contexts, and religious beliefs. However, these givens determine the "final product" of the individual's life no more than given building materials determine the floor plan of a house. The participants in our study demonstrate, through the lives they live, the unique ability of humans to determine their life direction notwithstanding given circumstances and tendencies.

A. Dean Byrd is the Assistant Commissioner of LDS Social Services and is a clinical faculty member of the Department of Psychology at Brigham Young University.
Mark D. Chamberlain is a doctoral student in the Clinical Psychology program at Brigham Young University.
Appendix A
Content of Interview Guide

1. General background information.
2. Explore the individual's history of dealing with homosexual issues.
3. Explore, more specifically, how the individual has coped with struggles and problems he or she has faced as a result of feelings of homosexual attraction.

What influences have facilitated coping?

Social
- Family?
- Friends, peer group?
- Ecclesiastical leaders/teachers/advisors?
  (e.g., Counseling, Confession)
- Religious activities from a social perspective:
  - Church attendance/worship service?
  - Social activities?

Cognitive
- Knowledge, learning?
- Identity?
- Religious beliefs and knowledge
  - Scriptures that made a difference
  - Identity (e.g., as a child of God)

Behavioral
- Specific behavior/activities used to cope
- Behavioral element of activities with others
  - Overt religious behaviors
    - Kneeling to pray
    - Laying on of Hands/blessings
    - Temple attendance
    - Service to others

Affective
- Mood
- Affective element of self-esteem
- Religious feelings
  - Feeling forgiven
  - Feel accepted by God/feeling the love of God

What influences have impeded coping?

Social
- Family?
- Friends, peers?
- Times felt lonely, isolated, different from group?
- Ecclesiastical leaders/teachers/advisors?
  - Counseling? Confession?
- Religious activities from a social perspective
Church attendance/worship service?
Social activities?

Cognitive
Knowledge, learning?
Identity? (e.g., belief that somehow faulty)
Religious beliefs and knowledge?
Scriptures that impacted in negative way?

Behavioral
Self defeating behaviors?
The behavioral element of activities with others?
Overt religious behaviors

Affective
Mood?
Affective element of self-esteem?
Religious feelings?
(e.g., feeling sinful, unacceptable)

Additional Questions:
(a) What religious strategies or prescriptions played a role in dealing with issues of homosexuality?
(b) What demands—unique from others with homosexual issues—were you forced to cope with by nature of your religion?

4. Explore the question of what influences play a role determining which of the coping methods the individual turned to.
5. Anything we've missed that you feel is important?

References