

The age of 'coming out' is now dramatically younger

October 11 2011

The repeal of the U.S. military's "Don't Ask Don't Tell" policy and the legalization of gay marriage in New York state represent great strides for the rights of lesbian, gay and bisexual people in America. And according to a Tel Aviv University researcher, such social progress is not the only significant shift.

The number of LGB teens who "come out" to [family](#) and friends has grown dramatically in the past two decades, says Dr. Guy Shilo of TAU's Bob Shapell School of Social Work. In 1991, the average coming-out age was 25. But as of 2010, he notes, it is 16 years old — a dramatic shift.

In a new study published in *Family Relations* on the stress factors and the mental health of sexual minorities, Dr. Shilo observes that family support and acceptance is becoming increasingly essential for LGB youth. "Family support is a crucial variable in the mental health of young LGBs, higher than [peer support](#)," says Dr. Shilo, who notes that it is difficult for a LGB teen to separate themselves from unsupportive families because they are still dependent on that family for their welfare.

Family by choice?

Dr. Shilo and Prof. Riki Savaya conducted a study of 461 self-identified LGB youth, aged 16-23, to examine how stress related to being part of a minority group was impacting their mental health. To determine stress

levels, the researchers investigated how participants felt about their family, friends and peer support, as well as their connection to the LGB community as an emotional support. Participants were evaluated for mental distress and feelings of well-being — the polar negative and positive of mental health.

While peer support certainly had an impact on the [mental health](#) of participants, researchers discovered that family support was more central to their sense of well-being. A lack of family support was found to significantly heighten mental distress among the study participants, which can lead to depression. In addition, researchers found that family acceptance had the strongest positive impact on self-acceptance of sexual orientation.

Adult LGBs who lack the support of their families, explains Dr. Shilo, often react by leaving their families behind. They build separate lives which can include "families of choice," where peer groups, mainly from the LGB community, form an alternative family structure give each other the same emotional support and sense of belonging that a family is meant to provide. But this is not always a viable option at a younger age.

Making a social change

Today, more adolescents are open about their sexual orientation – and the younger they are, the more important family connections tend to be. The average 16-year-old is still in school and depends on family for financial support, food and shelter. "They can't just get up and go," Dr. Shilo says.

The tendency of LGBs to come out earlier in life derives from social and cultural progress, Dr. Shilo explains. Most adult GLB's knew they were gay, lesbian or bisexual at the age of nine or ten. The increasing respect and recognition of the rights of sexual minorities have provided the

encouragement to "come out" at an earlier age.

In such an atmosphere, it is important to create a supportive and accepting social environment with additional social resources, says Dr. Shilo, who works with Beit Dror, a shelter for runaway LGB youth in central Tel Aviv supported by the Municipality and the Ministry of Welfare, and the Israel Gay Youth Organization, which provides social groups for LGB youth and young adults.

Provided by Tel Aviv University

Citation: The age of 'coming out' is now dramatically younger (2011, October 11) retrieved 26 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2011-10-age-younger.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.