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Sociology

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LGBTQ Teens Still Suffer

You would think that, as our society has progressed and being a part of the LGBTQ community has become more acceptable, LGBTQ teens would be having an easier time openly being themselves. The truth, however, is that LGBTQ teens continue to suffer from bullying, isolation, and mental health challenges. In the article, “For Gay and Transgender Teens, Will It Get Better?,” Jenna Wortham writes about the challenges LGBTQ teens face. She shows us statistics, and interviews 3 LGBTQ teens about the nature of their struggles. Although our culture may seem more accepting of the LGBTQ community, LGBTQ teens still struggle to a much greater extent than straight teens, because of bullying, isolation, and mental health concerns, but the internet may offer a sense of safety and connection for some.

LGBTQ teens suffer on a daily basis, and to a greater extent than the average teenager. Citing a major study by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Wortham writes, “The numbers are heartbreaking: Lesbian, gay and bisexual teenagers were more likely to have been in a fight; they were nearly three times as likely to skip school out of fear for their safety. About a third were bullied, both at school and online; nearly half said they had seriously contemplated suicide in the last year. Almost a third had tried it at least once in the same time frame. High school is already an academic and social pressure cooker, and the forces that make it stressful are amplified for queer students. Difference is prized, but only up to a point, and the social order determines your quality of life. Your placement within this cruel, arbitrary system can be a source of tremendous angst. Kids who don’t fit in are prime targets for all sorts of inventive ridicule and torture, made all the more easy by social media.” (2). Many people lash out at that which they don’t understand. This lack of understanding is the basis for all social alienation. It is the reason racism exists. It is the reason women are discriminated against, and it is the reason high school students may target LGBTQ individuals. Not understanding someone and their background or identity often means a person believes that these individuals are different from them in some way. One may think, because these individuals don’t look or act the way I do, that this means they don’t feel the way I do, that their difference makes them less than me, and that they don’t deserve to have what I have. This sort of “you are worth less than me” thinking can lead to bullying and seclusion for those at the other end. Bullying and seclusion can be traumatic, and can cause or worsen anxiety and depression. The teenage years already can be a time of uncertainty and exploration, and this uncertainty can get even worse if you are different from your peers. LGBTQ teens are often seen as being very different for an average heterosexual teen. These dramatic differences in the way LGBTQ teens express themselves may not make sense to a peer, and may incite ridicule and torture as their peers make themselves out to be “more worthy” than them. In addition to differences in expression and identity isolating teens who are a part of the LGBTQ community, these differences make it difficult for LGBTQ teens to find teens who can relate to them.

LGBTQ teens may find it very difficult to find peers who share their views, damaging their sense of connection and belonging in the world, and worsening their struggles. Wortham interviewed several LGBTQ teens, including Zeam, an eighteen year old transgender man. Wortham writes, “Zeam, who prefers the pronouns *they* and *them,* says their days were defined by ‘accidental’ body checks in the hallway, crying fits in the guidance counselor’s office and self-harm habits like cutting and eating disorders. There were only a few classmates who could really relate to what Zeam was going through. Many of Zeam’s friends had experienced homelessness, kicked out by their families. One of Zeam’s friends committed suicide. Even at a school that was nominally welcoming, and where Zeam’s teachers and fellow students made efforts to be accepting, Zeam still felt alienated. ‘I had this rage,’ Zeam said. ‘My issues are a lot deeper and more systematic than pronouns.’” (2). A lack of friends and close people to whom you can relate to can contribute to isolation and make an individual feel hopeless. I moved across the country at the age of 11 and lost my sense of connection to a community for a very long time. I was hurting, and like Zeam, turned to habits of self harm. I felt hopeless and lost, and thought that no one understood what I was going through. I had a hard time making friends, or even going to school on some days. I would self-harm out of anger, and as a method to escape the deep suffering that I felt within myself. I contemplated suicide. This feeling of alienation deepened my sense of being different from others, and got in the way of living a healthy, happy, meaningful life. It worsened my feelings of loneliness and helplessness. For the last two years of high school, I went to a small therapeutic school that had about 25 kids in it. Many of them considered themselves a part of the LGBTQ community, and I could see that being with other kids who also identified themselves differently from the average teen helped form a sense of community. It just wasn’t such a big deal as it may have been at the main campus. Nobody cared or even particularly brought any differences up. We were all accepted for who we were, and we related to each other as human beings. A sense of being different from others and not having peers who understand and want to understand can feel like torture for teens in the LGBTQ community. However, having an online presence can bridge this gap of alienation.

An online presence can help connect LGBTQ teens with others who may share their views and be a source of inspiration and encouragement, helping to reduce feelings of loneliness and isolation. Wortham interviewed Gabrielle Gladu, a transgender woman who began creating YouTube videos of her journey as a member of the LGBTQ community. Wortham writes, “Gabrielle Gladu attempted suicide before she started high school, when she was in the eighth grade. Before she came out as transgender, she despised her male body and found it disorienting, given how feminine she felt inside. Watching YouTube videos about gender helped her realize that she wasn’t gay but trans. During her freshman year, she came out as trans. She asked everyone to call her Belle, a shortened version of Gabrielle, and to use female pronouns. She also began documenting her transition online in a series of popular YouTube videos. Support flowed in, giving her the courage to continue, and she began her medical transition the next year. Even though she was an anomaly at her school, the internet reassured her she was not alone.” Because LGBTQ teens are a minority, finding others who share their views and can provide encouragement and friendship can be difficult. The internet allows for individuals to bridge the literal gap between each other and can strengthen them and help battle their sense of isolation. I had a trans friend in high school who documented his transition online through social media. They found that they felt respected and like they belonged when they were online, and received a lot of positive feedback. Social media allowed him to express himself and his views, and have this expression heard by others, just like Belle had found for herself. My friend found that being different from others isn’t a bad thing, and that it makes him unique in a world where so many try their best to blend in.

Being a part of the LGBTQ community as a teen is difficult. As a teen, one already has to deal with the pressures of academic life, and of the social hierarchy of high school. Those who identify themselves and express themselves very differently from others can draw unwanted attention to themselves in the form of harassment and bullying. These actions from others can instill a sense of alienation and loneliness in an LGBTQ teen, in a world where it is already difficult to find peers who share their values and experiences. However, having an online presence can help LGBTQ teens find solace and community with others who can encourage and emotionally support them in this uncertain time in their lives. Although our society may look like it is accepting on the surface, individuals can be cruel and misunderstanding. LGBTQ teens’ struggles are, statistically, greater than those of straight teens. These challenges need to be addressed through more education and greater support from schools. Despite all the suffering LGBTQ teens often go through, their challenges can eventually help shape make them stronger, shaping their resolve and determination. Their differences may come to be viewed as something very special that makes them who they are- a unique human being who has so much to offer to this world.