

Mentor

What is Gender Affirmative Mentoring?

Some men experience what is called “weak gender identification.” This means that they do not fully identify themselves with masculinity or the gender characteristics of men. This is common in, but not limited to, young boys that do not have male role models in their lives or for some reason do not connect with these men. Many professionals believe that this contributes to the environmental factors that influence same-sex attraction. A young man experiencing weak gender identification, meaning he does not feel like a guy, may distance himself from other guys and then become curious about the masculine lifestyle. During or around puberty, there is a greater chance of this curiosity taking on a sexual nature, which may develop into same-sex attraction. (There is further reading on gender identification in the appendix, under the title, “A M.A.N.S. Journey.”)

Gender Affirmative Therapy is therapy led by a professional where the focus is on helping the individual to identify himself as masculine. This is very difficult unless the young man has a masculine role model in every day life from whom he is able to learn.

Gender Affirmative Mentoring provides these young men with male role models who are secure in their masculinity. It can be compared to a Big Brother program, where the big brother is there to teach the younger brother how to be a man. The only difference is that these young men did not receive such mentoring as boys and need to receive it now if they want to become a part of the world of men and identify themselves as masculine, and in time throw off the programmed responses they have developed through same-sex attraction. The young men involved in mentoring are trying to live a straight lifestyle and, rather than simply focusing on their behaviors, are attempting to strike at the root of the problem.

A Gender Affirmative Mentor is not a counselor and is not necessarily a part of any therapy in regards to same-sex attraction. The sole role of the mentor is to be a masculine role model so that the young man can learn about masculinity from experience.

In the following pages, you will read what doctors have described as the characteristics of a good mentor. This is the ideal gender affirmative mentor and should be reviewed often. The young men that participate in such mentoring are allowing themselves into a situation of vulnerability because you will be privy to intimate knowledge about them which, in many cases, they have never shared with a non-professional. If you are to be a mentor, you must be able to be trusted with such knowledge.

The work you are participating in is not merely setting a good example, but life altering. You are fulfilling the call to “mourn with those that mourn, and comfort those that stand in need of comfort.” And more so, you are helping to provide a way out of the cause of mourning and discomfort. You are literally, in many cases for the first time, providing hope to the hopeless.

Some additional information is provided regarding same-gender attraction gender identification at the end of this booklet. This is for your information so that you can better understand your mentee. You are not expected to and should not provide counseling services to your mentee. Your role is to be an example of masculinity and nothing else.

How to be a Good Mentor

Adapted from "Characteristics of a Good Mentor"

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To be effective as a mentor, you must have several characteristics. No one can be the perfect embodiment of these characteristics. A good mentor must demonstrate self-confidence and good moral character. That is, you must have achieved a sense of masculine competence of your own.

A good mentor must have strong gender identity. That is, you must feel good about yourself as a man. This does not mean being super macho. Being super macho is actually a sign of weak gender identification. Evidence of sound gender security includes the lack of defensiveness or the need to prove anything to anyone, and active participation in his masculine roles, e.g. father, husband, provider, ecclesiastical leader, male friendships, and male-typical activities. In addition males with good gender identification relate respectfully and well to women. You respect and like women and it shows. In essence, you should enjoy every aspect of being a man.

A good mentor will have good ego-strength. What this means is that you do not get your feelings hurt easily and you have no problem saying 'no.' Mentoring can be very trying, and requires tenacity for the long haul. Same-sex attraction does not form overnight and even with motivated individuals it does not go away overnight. Your self-esteem cannot depend on the success of your mentee. You must remain positive, loving, and encouraging, no matter how badly your mentee fails.

Men who struggle with same-sex attraction can be at the same time emotionally needy and defensively detached. This means they long for emotional contact with men but fear being hurt. At the first sign of abandonment they can become defensive and even reactive which

may be interpreted as condescendence. You can never take the defensiveness personally and must be able to set limits on the emotional neediness.

A good mentor must be emotionally available. You must be comfortable with your own feelings and able to share these with the mentee. You must be comfortable with your own weaknesses, failures, embarrassments, and fears and be able to share these with the mentee at times when this type of disclosure would be helpful. You must be able to hear the mentee talk about his fears, anger, feelings of inadequacy, and pain without becoming anxious or needing to minimize or fix them. Talking about failures and fears may seem feminine but not when the tone of the conversation mirrors as it would occur between a father and son.

As a mentor, it is not your job to know what the mentee should do or how to fix his fears. This is very important. Your job as a mentor is to be present over the long haul and emotionally supportive. You are neither the mentee's moral authority nor therapist and you do not need to take responsibility for or direct him in these ways. Men who struggle with same-sex attraction badly need both spiritual direction and therapeutic help, but this is not your role as a mentor.

While you must be emotionally available, you should not lean on the mentee for emotional support. The mentor relationship mirrors the relationship of a healthy father-son dynamic. In this dynamic, the father provides for the son but the son does not provide for the father. Fathers get their needs met in the adult world while children seek their emotional support from their parents.

A good mentor must be physically affectionate. Many people believe that being physically affectionate with men who struggle with same-sex attraction will exacerbate or increase their symptoms. Nothing could be further from the truth. Men who struggle with same-sex attraction are afraid of male affection. It is precisely this fear that can make male affection so intensely sexually interesting. As long as you have a strong gender identity, there is no chance of the encounter becoming sexual. This is exactly the kind of safety the mentee needs to experiment with; allowing himself to genuinely love and need non-sexual male affection, as a boy receives from his dad. The deepest longing of the man who struggles with same-sex

attraction is not for sex. It is for love and affirmation.

Finally, a mentor must pursue the relationship with the mentee. The mentee at the core does not trust that you could ever be genuinely interested in him and at the same time, need nothing from him. This is a continuation of the father-child injury. For this reason the mentee will not be the initiator in the relationship. This will be re-enacted in the mentoring relationship. In addition, when there is any confusion or conflict the mentee is very likely to assume he did something wrong and withdraw or devalue the relationship. You are very likely to assume you did something wrong and withdraw or devalue the relationship. You must remember that the withdrawal from or devaluing of the relationship is a defense (usually unconscious) against the intense need and longing for the love and affirmation of an idealized male. You must not take anything personally and continue to gently but actively pursue the mentee.

Men who struggle with same-sex attraction long for a non-anxious connection with men. You need to take initiative in identifying activities that will be fun for both and yet not too anxiety provoking for the mentee. You should explore common interest such as art, music, theater, cars, or sports. Both you and the mentee can introduce each other to the things you individually enjoy. Over time, the relationship will develop that will allow more risks to be taken without the fear of humiliation.

Some men who struggle with same-sex attraction have defensively detached from masculinity so extensively that almost any male-typical activity will trigger a fear/inadequacy response. In the beginning, even watching a basketball game may be too much. Defensive detachment seldom is expressed as fear. A mentee will probably never say, "I'm afraid of appearing stupid if I watch a game with you." He is much more likely to express disinterest such as, "I have never seen the point of football. It is nothing but egotistical male aggression." You must see through this defense and slowly encourage him to be a part of the world of men. This can only happen over time and when trust is established. It is not necessary for all men who struggle with same-sex attraction to become NFL fans. They must however develop to the point that they can attend a Super Bowl party or a church softball game without feeling overwhelmed with anxiety and inadequacy.

Learning to play and be competitive at team sports is often a problem for men who struggle with same-sex attraction. They should be encouraged to do so, however, this should be approached with extreme caution. Even encouragement in this area can trigger significant fear, which leads to compulsions to act out. This is often an area of significant childhood injury and many have trained themselves to completely avoid these activities. It is typical for these men to gravitate toward individual sports such as track, swimming, diving, and ice-skating to avoid being a member of a team. They feel inadequate to perform in a situation where other men rely on them in competition. Even minor failures in a team sport can be experienced as devastating inadequacy and overwhelming humiliation. It may be wise to consult the mentee's therapist before approaching this issue.

It is important to include the mentee in your family events. Many men who struggle with same-sex attraction come from families with poor dynamics and so have a distorted view of family.

If the mentee is not active in the Church, encourage Church-based activities but go slowly. Church attendance can increase anxiety, which in turn can lead to increased sexual compulsion. Seek feedback from your mentee. He knows what he needs. Be open to his suggestions and trust them. If at any point you hurt or disappoint your mentee, sincerely apologize without making excuses. It may be his first experience of humility from an authority figure. This can be very healing.

Use his talents. Never evaluate his talents in terms of the masculinity of the activity. All men are created by God, completely masculine. His preferences, talents, and feelings are completely masculine. Everything about him is completely masculine. The thing men who struggle with same-sex attraction lack is an internalized sense (feeling) of masculine adequacy. There is no objective thing that he is lacking. The last thing he needs is to have a man he respects infer, even indirectly, that he is in some way less than completely male.