

## **What Do You Do When You Learn a Brother or Sister is Gay?**

Most fraternity and sorority nondiscrimination policies and educational efforts neglect to discuss or mention sexual-orientation issues. As a result, many members may never have encountered someone who is gay or may not know what to do when they learn a brother/sister is gay. Such practices jeopardize brother/sisterhood for both gay and straight members by perpetuating the ignorance and fear surrounding homosexuality. This list provides some suggested ideas to keep in mind when a brother/sister learns that another brother/sister is gay.

### *A Brother/Sister Comes Out to You*

#### *What to do?*

- Listen to what he/she has to say and try to keep an open mind.
- Understand the personal risk he/she took in telling you, and if you are confused, be honest about your feelings. Realize the trust he/she has placed in you.
- Realize that your brother/sister has not changed. You may be shocked, but remember that he/she is still the same person as before he/she came out to you.
- Respect his/her choice to tell you by letting him/her know that you will not tell anyone he/she is gay. Realize that the member has to come out to the fraternity/sorority when he/she is ready.
- Feel free to ask questions to better understand your brother/sister, such as:
  - How long have you known that you were gay?
  - Do other brothers/sisters or friends know that you are gay?
  - Has it been hard for you to carry around this secret?
  - How can I be most supportive of you?
- Actions speak louder than words so offer your support and willingness to help him/her through his/her coming-out process. He/she may really need a brother/sister like you to count on right now.
- Communicate support to your brother or sister. He/she may feel isolated, as if he/she is the only one.

- Know what you are talking about by using resources on the college campus. Try to educate yourself, and, if comfortable, be an ally on the issue.
- Most important, remember the meaning of brother/sisterhood and be a brother/sister.

### *A Member is Outed to the Chapter*

#### *What to do?*

- Approach the brother/sister in private (if possible) and let him/her know that you are willing to listen and be a brother/sister.
- Calm the member if he/she is upset by the outing and allow him/her to take the lead or speak about his/her feelings.
- Stand up for your brother/sister as you would for any other member.
- Attempt to resolve any conflict among other members who may not understand by asking them to give the brother/sister some time to process his/her feelings.
- Seek expertise from campus officials or national headquarters if you are concerned about the chapter's response and need assistance processing the experience.
- Let the member know that you value him/her as a brother/sister and as a person, no matter what.

### *A Member Is Suspected or Perceived to be Gay*

#### *What to do?*

- Try not assume anything about your brother's/sister's sexual orientation.
- Remember that your brother/sister may be gay, but not ready to acknowledge this to him/herself or others. He/she needs to come out when he/she is ready.
- Be supportive of your brother/sister, possibly bringing up gay topics to communicate that you would be a person with whom he can talk.
- Understand that your brother/sister may not be gay.

## *Your Brother/Sister is Gay*

### *What not to do?*

- Do not think it is just a phase and that you can help your brother/sister find the “right” woman/man.
- Do not be afraid to ask questions about being gay or about the coming-out process.
- Do not assume that your brother/sister finds you attractive.
- Do not try to change the member. Do accept him/her as being gay.
- Do not ignore the member or treat him/her differently after he/she has come out. Still invite him/her along when you go out and, most importantly, do not change who you are.
- Do not be ashamed or fail to defend a member who is gay if otherwise he/she is a good brother/sister.
- Do not be afraid to use the word “gay” and do not ignore him/her when he/she brings up gay topics.
- Do not try to restrict the member’s freedom to share being gay or to be a public role model. The Greek system and the campus at large need more out student leaders to identify with – do not be surprised if more Greeks start to come out of the closet.
- Do not be worried about what other chapters think or about the reputation of the chapter. Lead by example and remember that there are gay members in every house. Some are simply less fortunate and do not have the open-minded environment for members to come out.
- Do not assume that all of his/her guests are dates and do not make a big deal if he/she brings a date to the house or a fraternity/sorority function.
- Treat him/her with respect as you would any other person.
- Do not kick him/her out of the chapter for being gay. Such an action may be a violation of university policy and definitely contradicts the ideals of your organization.

- Do not be afraid to approach a gay member if you think their actions are inappropriate. Hold a gay member to the same standards as all members.
- Do not treat the member as if he/she is a public relations disaster for the chapter since they have come out. Support their openness and work together to communicate similar messages. Trust that they are going to proudly represent your organization wherever they go, as always.
- Do not feel let down if the gay member decides to leave the chapter because of other members' actions or behavior. Be supportive and still be their friend.

SOURCE: Shane L. Windmeyer and Pamela W. Freeman, Lambda 10 Project