

Homophobia

*There is nothing wrong with being straight.
There's everything wrong with being straight and narrow.
The former is a sexuality: heterosexuality.
The latter is prejudice: homophobia*

Homophobia is the fear or loathing of homosexuality. It is often based on what an individual believes to be an appropriate masculine/feminine role. This usually leads to:

- **Discrimination**, which reflects an assumption of superiority of one group over another. People are disadvantaged on the basis of their real or perceived membership of a particular group. Discrimination includes less favourable treatment, unfair exclusion, and inappropriate questions in interviews. Along with this comes:
- **Harassment**, where one person exerts power over the other, often presenting itself as bullying behaviour. Harassment can be physical, verbal or psychological, and involves insults, intimidation, and behaviour that incites hatred. It is usually repeated.

Types of Homophobia

- **Personal:** The belief that non-heterosexual people are immoral, sinful, inferior or incomplete as women or men. Such views are always learned and may be internalised by non-heterosexual people themselves, resulting in reduced expectations from life or engaging in behaviours which are harmful to them or others.
- **Interpersonal:** The active dislike of non-heterosexual people, usually leading to verbal and sometimes physical assaults.
- **Institutional:** Discrimination by government, business, churches, schools and other institutions on the basis of people's sexuality.
- **Cultural:** The expectation by society at large that everyone who is worthwhile will marry a person of the opposite sex and will most likely have children.

Who is homophobia directed at?

Some of the characteristics of students which lead to homophobic abuse have more to do with expectations about 'masculinity' and 'femininity' than actual sexuality. They include:

Boys

Dependent, emotional, tender
Rejecting team sports
Not being sexually interested in girls
Associating with girls as friends
Being too neat and tidy
Rejecting the peer group, a loner

Girls

Being 'tough'
Being 'sporty'
Not being sexually interested in boys
Associating with boys as friends
Not worrying about clothes, makeup
Rejecting the peer group, a loner

Homophobia Damages and Kills

- On all health and emotional wellbeing measures, New Zealand's same-sex attracted youth are doing less well than heterosexual youth. They are twice as likely to have significant depressive symptoms, nearly three times as likely to have self-harmed, and five times as likely to have attempted suicide. They are twice as likely to be sexually active, and far more likely to have unprotected sex. (Youth 2007 study)
- Opposite sex-attracted students in New Zealand are 11% less likely than same-sex attracted students to feel safe at school all or most of the time. Students thought to be gay are nearly five times more likely than heterosexual students to have been bullied at school. (Youth 2007 study)
- In an Otago University study, only 5% of students and 8% of teachers perceived that non-heterosexual students would feel safe at their school.
- An Australian study found that school was the most common place for same-sex attracted young people to experience abuse, with 80% of those who were abused naming the school as the site of the abuse. (Writing Themselves In 2010)
- Experience of homophobic attitudes can prevent people from acting on sexual health issues such as HIV prevention (NZ Aids Foundation survey).
- Gay men are at increased risk of harassment, violence and murder. 'Hate crimes' against non-heterosexual people are beginning to be recognised, and a number have been publicised in New Zealand recently.
- A recent Human Rights Commission poll found that 74% of respondents believed that there was from 'some' to 'a great deal' of discrimination against gays and lesbians in NZ.

The Benefits of an Anti-Homophobia Policy

Homophobic behaviour is both a personal and a professional issue. It can damage self-worth and self-confidence in its victims. It can disrupt study or work, result in truancy or absenteeism, and affect health and personal relationships. The psychological impact can remain for many years and affect all aspects of a person's life.

A harasser can become the subject of a complaint to a Board of Trustees, a personal grievance action, a complaint to the Human Rights Commission or a criminal or civil court case. Boards with proactive policies and effective procedures make themselves less likely to face costly law suits for damages.

If you hear your fellow staff, parents and students claiming:

'What's the problem? We've got no one like that at this school!'

then you will have heard them identify the real problem.

However big or small your staffroom or school is, if there are no 'out' non-heterosexual staff members or students at your school, it is almost certainly because they do not believe that the school is a positive, supportive and safe enough place to be visible. In the Youth 2007 4.2% of students identified as same- or both-sex attracted. This is likely to understate the true rate, and the percentage of adults will be at least as high. Many people have non-heterosexual family and friends. Lack of public identification is not because they are not there.

Like all hate, homophobia damages everyone.