

WORDS OF EXPERIENCE

FROM AN OLDER TO A
YOUNGER GAY PERSON

A BOOK BY
FRANK SOTZIK

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Those who know do not talk, Those who talk do not know.

Lao Tzu, ca. 600 BC¹

DEDICATED TO THE GAY PEOPLE OF THE WORLD WHO STRUGGLE WITH CHOICES IN LIFE.



Frank Sotzik
AUTHOR

Contents

Acknowledgements 8

Cautionary Note 8

Introduction 9

Purpose of this book

About the author

Note on style

Chapter 1 : Career choices 12

The effect of being gay on career choices

Choosing a career

Succeeding in a career

Discrimination at work

Integration of a gay person into the team at work

Choose recreational activities outside a career carefully

Chapter 2 Coming out, intimacy, relationships and marriage 21

Coming out

The range of variation between gay and straight

The pressure not to remain single

Dating

Intimacy

Making a case for intimacy

Relationships and marriage (straight and gay)

Building trust

Chapter 3: HIV virus transmission and safe sex 41

Infection by a virus

A virus needs a target

HIV infection, AIDS and why it is difficult to treat

HIV transmission

HIV prevention

Abstinence, comments by others to avoid sex and faithfulness to one partner

Hepatitis vaccination and testing for sexually transmitted diseases



Chapter 4 : Women's Issues 48

- Education and equality for women and men
- Gay ladies (lesbians) and freedom of self-expression
- Masculinity, femininity and relationships of gay ladies (lesbians)
- Opinions of young straight women about straight guys and women dating them

Chapter 5 : Masculinity and what it means to be a man 53

- What it means to be a man according to a transgender person who has experienced being both female and male
- The difference between sexual preference and gender identity: A discussion on being transgender
- Inner versus outer aspects of being a man
- Gay men discuss whether or not a man should act masculine
- The ideal of being a man and thinking about this concept to avoid potential confusion

Chapter 6 : Parents, relatives and friends 61

- The response of my own parents to me being gay
- My social life after coming out
- Discussions with other gay men on coming out to their parents and friends
- Views of young gay men on how parents can help their gay children
- Real versus fake friends

Chapter 7 : Social interactions, bullying and abuse 68

- Facebook and other social media services

- Physical and verbal bullying
- Bullying by spreading gossip and promoting social exclusion
- Use of social media to bully: "Cyberbullying"
- Abuse within a family
- Use of social media services by employers to establish a good match (fit) to their work culture
- Social media and desiring popularity
- Social media and its influence on sex and relationships of young straight people

Chapter 8 : Looking good on a low budget 81

- A philosophy of health potentially also promotes beauty
- Fast food and reducing excessive fat and salt
- Healthy food
- Choosing healthy natural plant-based foods
- Buying healthy fruits and vegetables
- Tips for vegetarians and vegans
- Tips for weight loss and general health
- Healthy food shopping on a low budget
- Regular exercise

Body mass index (BMI)

Gaining fitness versus losing weight

Tips to save time for exercise and other healthy activities

Positive thinking and personality

Beauty and fashion

Personalised beauty care, posture and grooming

Chapter 9 : Drugs, including alcohol and the genetic lottery 104

Brain science as background to understanding recreational drug actions

Reasons people may use recreational drugs related to their medicinal properties

The self-medication hypothesis

Non-medical reasons people may use recreational drugs

The genetic lottery and suffering versus enjoyment for purely recreational users of drugs

The biochemical process leading to drug dependence and addiction

Accidental recreational drug overdose and potential addiction treatment

Conclusion

Chapter 10 : Medical and bodily health issues and alternative medicine 119

Health issues for young gay people

Seeking medical advice and preventing the spread of infections

Alternative medicine

Pregnancy

Smoking

Alcoholism

Sleep disorders

Learning about health

Chapter 11 : Mental health 128 - *and self-harm practices, including suicide*

The seeds of poor mental health

Changes in brain function as a mental health condition develops

Stress related to difficulty coping with being gay, mental health problems and suicide

Self-harm, including suicide

Mental health needs and achieving good mental health

Mental health diagnosis and treatment

Treatment of mental health conditions with medications

Mental health treatment based on counselling, the importance of communication and the role of the unconscious



Chapter 12 : Spiritual matters 147

- such as the search for purpose and meaning, religion and self-empowerment

Faith, agnosticism and atheism: Believing whether or not there a God

Spirituality as part of a healthy life

Self-empowerment

How to find purpose and meaning if one cannot see it

Following a spiritual or religious path

Religion and being gay

Chapter 13 : Exploring evidence against being gay by choice 153

- addressing discrimination based on a potentially false assumption that being gay is a matter of choice

Psychosocial research example

Hormonal activity during development

"Nature" (genetics) versus "nurture" (the environment)

Epigenetics

Anatomy of brain regions

Conclusion

Chapter 14 : The gay community and support organisations 158

Advantages of being part of a community

Myths and stereotypes

Anti-gay laws in certain countries around the world

Organisations which support gay people

Keeping the gay community friendly and welcoming

Conclusion 164

Cautionary Note 165

References 166

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Cautionary Note

Surprisingly bad events have occurred in some countries only months before the release date of this book in early April 2014. To the reader: You are an individual to whom homophobia may potentially bring harm; please consider your safety and survival if you are in a country and situation where this applies. Parents and guardians, please consider these aspects for anybody under your care and not yet an adult. This message has been placed at the beginning and end of this book.



Introduction

Purpose of this book

In providing the quotation from a source of ancient Chinese philosophy which I like at the start of this book, I recognise the irony of attempting to address issues which can only be put into words inadequately. It is hoped that this book will address a need among young gay people which may not have been done adequately before. I have mixed (socially and at work) with many people aged 18 to 20 years for 10 years since 2003 for reasons to be given shortly. There are areas of concern. The discrimination against gay people which I had observed and experienced when I was 18 to 20 is greatly reduced. Yet people still do not seem to feel the freedom to demonstrate their love and affection for a friend of the same sex openly.

In response to the restriction of a wholesome freedom of expression and from my experiences of the difficulties of being a gay man with a biomedical science career, I have written this book. It is my hope that in doing so, many other people may have more career satisfaction, improved relationships with their friends and work colleagues, as well as a dimension of true romance and real love in their lives.

At this point some readers might think the author is moralising or possibly a “born again Christian”. Nothing could be further from the truth. By not judging others, I believe that I learn more from them.

In addition, this book does not offer advice. This is not a disclaimer, like a hypothetical laundry service that proclaims all care is taken but no responsibility, so if something goes wrong it is one’s own fault. Rather, it is not my place to give advice. People are indeed looking for answers and direction, but the choices are theirs. As the reader has free choice, I must not interfere. Furthermore, many of the topics covered in this book are outside my training and experience. I am not trained in specialised branches of psychology or the science of how humans interact in groups.

Hence it should be as if the reader is in the company of a friend rather than that someone is telling him or her what to do.

Indeed, as certain topics in this book apply equally to both “gay” and “straight” people but I am a gay man, then surely I would not have the relevant direct experience to deliver advice. Well then, what am I contributing? Firstly, to give the gay reader the feeling that he or she is not alone. We should have a number of experiences in common. As I am already 46 years old at the time of writing this book, my perspective and suggestions can be useful to avoid some of the mistakes I made. Although I have tried to satisfy as wide a readership as possible, this book is probably more useful to young people who have not gained much experience of adult life yet. That does not mean that older people cannot benefit from reading this book, rather that they may already have much useful experience of their own. Finally, this book is being written at an opportune time. As mentioned in the opening paragraph, discrimination against gay people is much less than before. It should now be possible for large numbers of gay people to have fulfilling romantic and career lives in a way that could well have been impossible before. It is hoped that this book might aid this process, much like a catalyst which speeds up a chemical reaction. Thus ultimately, I am hoping to contribute to constructive social change in the world at the time when it is ready for it.

About the author

Now that the reader knows why I am writing this book, I must explain why it should be done by me rather than someone else. Much criticism could follow, so maybe I should squeeze out of the task! In any case, I believe that I have a unique combination of training and experience which is ideally suited to writing this book, as long as I have sufficient courage to commit to this.

Having been very much a nerd and with an interest in a science since childhood, I obtained a Bachelor of Science Degree with first class Honours in biochemistry from a university and a PhD Degree for HIV-related immunology research done at a world-famous institution. As I write these words on my Apple iPhone 4 in a taxi during a break while working a Friday night shift, I am quite convinced that my experience can help others avoid such a dramatic career change. Now, there is much more I can write about myself and my life experience. However, the nature of this socially sensitive book is such that I wish to avoid naming institutions and people, some of whom have treated me badly. Have not all people, gay and straight, experienced unkind treatment by others from time to time?

Yet if I give away too many details, it will detract from my message. It will enable others to be blamed for their bad actions, which if done out of prejudice could well also have been done out of ignorance. In other words, if people believe or are taught that people such as gays, Jews, Moslems or Christians are sub-human, can the perpetrators be blamed for discriminating in ignorance? Even if some readers believe so, this book is not intended to stop prejudice.

For a start that is too difficult. Furthermore, by offending a number of readers little is gained. Rather, the purpose of this book is to help gay people. Hence, readers will find this book lacks mention of many names and places relating to events in my life. After completing my PhD, I gave a talk to a lab at Stanford University in USA. This is the only institution I shall name because I did not work or study there! I could have done research there for a couple of years. Although it might have been good for my career, it would have been unpaid. After four years of a PhD Degree, I felt I should be earning money.

After completing my formal education, I worked in biomedical research for a number of years in Australia and in Taiwan. Additionally, I have worked on a small clinical trial (for cancer treatment), as a university lecturer in various biomedical sciences and as a night-shift taxi driver (including Friday and Saturday nights). My lecturing and taxi driving work has allowed me to observe how young people cope with gay issues. Since I live close to a gym associated with a university, where I have trained with many students aged 18 to 20 for 10 years, it has enabled me to interact with potentially gay individuals. As the reader should gather, my experiences are useful to write a book of this nature and at an opportune era in history when prejudice seems to be at an all-time low.



Note on style

Style here refers to a manner of writing unique to the individual, rather than a fabulous fashion statement! This book has a worldwide readership among people with potentially varied experience with English, who may prefer other languages. This is the first time that I have written a book like this. Previously, my writing experience mostly consisted of contributions to scientific research journal articles, university theses and progress reports for research.

Therefore, I hope that the reader is patient with my style. I often use the “third person”; namely, “the author” rather than “I” or “me”. In addition, some of my descriptions may seem mechanical but it comes from my background. A hypothetical example: “Add buffer B to solution A. Stir for 30 minutes at 37 degrees Celsius, then place the beaker on ice.”

It helps to be able to laugh at oneself in life... oh, I mean “I”... at “myself”, I think.

Research and university writing often includes many references to other texts. Where possible, I am avoiding the use of too many references because it is distracting. Please be assured that facts have been checked, even if a concerned reader feels the need for more references. However, potentially useful or interesting references are included. Anyway, apart from a style that may sometimes seem odd, I hope that the meaning will always be clear.

Chapter 1 : Career choices

This book is not a career guide, nor a gay guide. Such books are readily available, so I am not trying to duplicate or summarise the typical information provided. A good book causes two minds to be in direct communication, reader and author. That is what I am hoping to achieve.

My parents wanted me to have a university degree, regardless of which career choice I made. Hence, they wanted me to have a good start in life. Most parents want the best for their children. The difficulty is that one has to live with the result of one's choices. As I have seen in talking with my students while I was a university lecturer and from my own experience, it is hard to decide on a career at a young age.

The effect of being gay on career choices

When also struggling to come to terms with being gay, career choices are so much harder. One often just wants to escape and avoid the issue. Inner conflict makes it hard to achieve well and reach one's potential. This then destroys confidence. When a student is prevented from achieving good results it limits career choices available.

For these reasons, I strongly believe that a young gay person should come to terms with this as soon as possible. This does not mean having sex, rather just being able to accept being gay totally and thus feeling comfortable with it. In the chapter on mental health and self-harm practices, including suicide, I shall discuss this in greater detail. I myself struggled to accept being gay until I was 21 years old. It did affect my marks. Although the university I attended had a gay club, I hardly ever visited or participated in events. If I had actively joined in, then it would have let me accept being gay far more easily. Even though it is intimidating, I think it is helpful for gay students to get to know one another, even at the risk of having bad company.

It is possible that gay friends one has made may encourage the use of "recreational" drugs or behave in ways which make one feel uncomfortable. Even people who are not gay can do this. It is important to feel free to refuse to get involved. I am not trying to moralise. That is not what this book is about and morality is very personal in any case. With sufficient self esteem, one can assert oneself to make the choices one feels good about.

Once one has accepted being gay, career choices can remain difficult to make. Unfortunately, people are forced to decide between career alternatives very early, preventing options from being kept open. I think that it helps to be older and have more life experience, in order to know what one likes and what type of work will bring the most satisfaction.

Many myths exist about types of work with a gay-friendly culture and those without it. In my opinion, targeting such mythical workplaces matters less than career satisfaction. I have often heard that being openly gay is better accepted in the arts than in the sciences. Not having worked in the arts, it is difficult to comment. However, from my interactions with others including those who have worked in the arts, workplaces vary a great deal. People working within the arts can also have problems relating to their freedom to express their gay sexuality at work.



Hence, I think that it would be a mistake to choose a form of work in which one has no interest, based on the assumption that one would be accepted as an openly gay person just because of the type of work performed.

However, I also think that if a person might naturally be interested to work in fields considered to be more gayfriendly, then he or she should seek advice from people currently working within those fields in a chosen profession. Of course, it is also important to know if one's employment prospects are realistic, or one can train but not have a job which relates to the training afterwards. Keeping these potential problems in mind can help in making choices leading to career satisfaction.

One aspect of mythical gay-friendly fields of work which I think is important, relates to freedom to find and choose a partner. If it is too difficult to identify other gay people at work, then it can be difficult to find a partner. For a gay man, this can be an issue in biomedical science work, in my experience and also as I had been told. Biomedical sciences still have a leadership which is mostly male-dominated and a junior workforce which is mostly female, such as at the research assistant level. This appears to be changing and it is obvious that efforts are being made to have more females in leadership positions. In my experience, many young females are keen to find a partner of the opposite sex. Therefore, this can make it difficult for a gay person (especially a male) to find a partner in the biomedical sciences.

Choosing a career

In my case, I have liked science for as long as I can remember. However, I have had other interests. As I had strong spiritual leanings and aspired towards helping others, medicine and social work were possibilities. My interest in computers caused me to have an interest in electronics, although I never took this up. Having an artistic and creative streak, photography became a way of artistic expression. Thus it would not have taken much persuasion to view photography as a career option. In my case, as that of many others, one can see how confusion over career choices can arise. Circumstances and choices in life led me to science. Other than conflicting interests, the major reason for my uncertainty was that it was so obvious, that it was easy to overlook. I was so familiar with my passion for science, that I thought my career choice had to be something else which was hard to figure out; much as looking for a pair of sunglasses above one's eyebrows when one has forgotten one has them on.

Therefore, it is helpful to consider one's interests and personality. It is important to look for one main interest above all others. If someone does not feel strongly about anything, lacking interests or with a sense of apathy, then it can be helpful to consider many topics at random. One of them may arouse enthusiasm for a career choice. People have different values contributing to career satisfaction, not only concerning interests. There are career centres in universities and government offices dedicated to matching people with ideal careers, which may use questionnaires in computer software to narrow down choices. All this assistance can be helpful. However, as the individual must decide, it is important not to feel confused due to additional information. Once a person is in the workforce, the same process of making career choices may well continue. From my experience and that related by others, career paths are winding. One cannot expect to have the perfect job or career immediately after training and remain in it. Thus, one may move to careers of increasing satisfaction, more closely matching one's interests and personality.

Succeeding in a career

Much can be said about strategy in order to advance in a career. As I sit at a rank in this taxi typing on my iPhone, I'm not sure that I am the best person to suggest how to achieve an illustrious career. None-the-less, there are a few tips that can save some suffering in the workforce.

Firstly, trust is an important issue. Mind-reading and predicting the future appear to be gifts very few possess. Obviously, not everyone at work is an angel and one can encounter people who intend to harm others in their careers. However, one can still be on agreeable terms with others at work but be careful about trusting them. It seems harsh to write this but in my experience young people can be more trusting and easily hurt. With careful observation one can learn whom one can trust and whom one cannot. Even then, life can present unpleasant surprises! If one is prepared for all this, it hurts less. It does not mean one has to be negative or bitter; one can remain positive-minded and cheerful. This would apply to all people, not just those who are gay.

Even before one chooses or starts a new job one can deal with the issue of trust. Given that human nature is not always angelic, one should check out a new job before starting. One can contact previous employees or people who deal with the business or other organisation concerned. It is important to establish whether dealings were fair and people respectfully treated. In the case of a job, one would need to know if working there was helpful to the careers of others, or whether they were being mercilessly used. Otherwise, getting the next job could be difficult. There are also issues relating to the matching (fit) of a prospective employee to the work culture. These are important issues for employers to consider as well as employees and are discussed further in the chapter of this book discussing social media (why will be clearer later). Trust is very much a two-way street.

In the case of scientific or research jobs (where I have experience), this can mean checking the publication record. Lack of publications can destroy research careers, so one needs to know if doing research at a particular institution leads to publications. If not, one would need to know why. For example, if publications are being used only as a reward for doing other things, then one could finish the job after some time with nothing to show for many long hours worked. There can of course be genuine reasons for lack of publications. There are also other things to check. For example, if students or junior staff such as lab assistants also appear on publications. In the past they were not always routinely included in the list of authors, even if they had a major role in the publication. It is a courteous and proper gesture to include them where their contribution was significant and reflects well on the workplace. Acts of generosity and kindness also give a good impression but may always be just for show. Although there are many types of careers, not just scientific- or research-related, similar principles apply concerning signs of a supportive workplace.

Although I am not discussing job interviews in this book, social graces and politeness are essential for success, unless the employers are desperate to fill a vacant position. Although education helps, I do not think it is essential beyond what is required for the job. Here, it is worth telling a joke. Two men were applying for a job to help guard a head of state. Height was important and the interviewing panel checked this and also wanted to see their fingernails and calves. Then they were asked to show their testimonials. Next the two men were talking together outside, after the job interview. One man said to the other, "We could have got the job, if only we were better educated!"



Not having experience in Personnel or Human Resources work, it is difficult to comment on characteristics which employers favour in an employee. Yet, in writing about careers, it is relevant to give my views, as in my experience there are practices which are overlooked at work but provide opportunities to excel. Hard work, being on-time, following instructions, using one's initiative (not needing to be told everything) and attention to detail are obviously important. Going beyond the call of duty is helpful. Good grooming and looking neat and presentable are also helpful.

For example, I did not know that I had a strong body odour until it was told to me tactfully in a respectful manner and in private by a previous boss. As I was already wearing clean clothing, starting to use a deodorant regularly was the solution. If the management is conservative, they may not like metal body piercings or hair which is dyed colours such as green, pink or blue.

Even jewellery, such as earrings or necklaces when worn by males may be disliked by employers. Obviously, when operating heavy machinery with exposed moving parts, jewellery such as necklaces, earrings/studs or bracelets and long hair not tied back could be dangerous (getting caught in machines). It is not uncommon to see phones being unanswered at a workplace while staff members are gossiping nearby.

An unanswered phone could mean a lost sales opportunity for a business, and similar signs of a lack of attention to duty may be unpopular with an employer. If one is burdened with a sense of apathy, looking for ways to increase motivation can help one improve performance at work. Examples could be reading books away from work related to the type of work to increase interest in it (such as journal articles or science fiction for a lab job), or trying to identify with the positive aspects of the job. Many jobs have very boring aspects (even scientific research). If one has stressful personal problems, trying to address these can make it easier at work. Thus excelling in a job is no simple matter.

One very good way to succeed at work is to have a mentor. If a staff member is talented and obviously makes an effort to do a good job, a mentor may be drawn to him or her. In my opinion, this is a good thing. A mentor is a person (normally a staff member but who may be retired) with a great deal of experience. The mentor is usually quite willing to share his or her experience with the person who has the characteristics to excel (prospective mentee). It is an act of generosity and in my opinion what is required in return is really only following advice given and becoming successful as a result. I think that this is the satisfaction which a mentor is seeking, to help someone on his or her way. Due to the selfless assistance given, I think that one should show respect and gratitude to a mentor. I believe we can help to create the type of world in which we live. Therefore, it is good to be polite and kind, even when it is not demanded, as it helps to change the world for the better. Of course, this does not mean one must expect this from others! One can search for a mentor at work but in my experience, the mentor will actually look for staff members to assist, if one is making a sincere effort to do well.

Discrimination at work

Unfortunately, being gay can affect one's career or job satisfaction once one is actually working. A gay person in the workforce can have a variety of unpleasant experiences, such as being bullied, being the subject of nasty rumours or gossip or simply being ignored socially. This is discussed in a separate chapter. More subtle problems can occur, such as failure to be considered for good opportunities or promotion, or not having one's work appreciated even when it is outstanding.

Organisations which employ people normally have codes of conduct which include statements relating to discrimination. Of course, it is understood that it is wrong to discriminate. However, written codes of conduct normally list various forms of discrimination which are not allowed at work. Frequently, these include race, colour, religion or gender (male or female). It is not uncommon that “sexual orientation” (such as gay or straight) is not listed as a basis for discrimination. However, even if not listed, all forms of discrimination are understood to be wrong.

Here it is good to mention the concept of political correctness, where something is not ideal but is treated in a professional manner. Thus if I am having trouble understanding a new concept, as is often the case, I am “intellectually challenged” rather than using a less kind word or phrase.

In this book, I often use the terms gay and straight, for homosexual and heterosexual, respectively. These terms are familiar to large numbers of people and gay and straight do not sound too clinical, like the term “reproductive organs”.

Within the gay community it is politically correct to use the term “Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender (LGBT)”. In fact, the intention is to make the gay community as inclusive as possible of all people who could identify with it. Examples of variations of LGBT which are even more inclusive are LGBTQ, LGBTQQ and LGBTIA; where “Q” stands for “queer” (explained below) and/or “questioning” (determining one’s sexuality or male/female identity), “I” stands for “intersex” (a person having a difference between his or her external genitals and internal bodily sex, as male/female) and “A” stands for asexual (not much interest in sex, generally). Issues related to gender identity are discussed later in the chapter entitled “masculinity and what it means to be a man”. A young gay man explained the term “queer” to me, when I asked how it was different from “gay”. He said that it avoids labelling a person, as does the term gay. Thus people identifying with either of the terms gay or queer represent a larger number of people within the gay community than those only identifying as gay. Queer was reclaimed as a word of choice from one which was originally used as a term of insult. Hence, I am not being politically correct in order to keep this book simple. No offence is intended. Most organisations probably function in the same manner and would not wish to officially encourage discrimination of any form.

Integration of a gay person into the team at work

In my opinion, employers usually favour the team and teamwork over the high flyer who is excellent but who antagonises others at work. If this should happen because of discrimination against a gay employee, even if not his or her fault, this person may be forced to leave work. It is quite likely that the reasons given cannot be argued with by the worker, rather than the employers admitting that it was due to discrimination and the resulting unpopularity. Ultimately, the employer would be acting to preserve the team spirit by dismissing the unpopular gay employee.

As it is in the employer’s interest to integrate a gay employee into his or her team, there are strategies to consider. It is important to act carefully because these can backfire. In this book I am offering them as suggestions to apply where appropriate, not advice to be taken without thinking first because I want more people to succeed, rather than just avoid blame for loss of a job.



Firstly, it is important to have the management supporting the gay staff member. A common theme is that the attitude of the management is essential to preventing discrimination at work. Thus, if the senior leadership are actively prejudiced, then preventing discrimination is likely to be impossible. However, even if prejudiced, carrying this out is bad for business. Therefore, even with prejudiced senior leadership, there is still hope to improve treatment of a gay employee.

It is important for the employee experiencing discrimination to tell an offending staff member that he or she does not like the behaviour. Of course, if it is simply bullying, then one can imagine the gleeful happiness of the bully when he or she hears that the fellow employee does not like it.

Quite possibly, this is a major reason why a gay employee being discriminated against would not complain; in other words, not wishing to add to the enjoyment of the bully. However, to have management on the side of the gay person, it is necessary that dislike of an offence is admitted to the bully by the person being bullied. Otherwise, the person bullying can claim that he or she did not know and the management has no right to reprimand or punish the bully.

In my opinion, this is also one reason why bullying is often done secretly behind the back of the person being bullied. This way such confrontation cannot lead to reprimand. "What have I done?" the bully could say, "Why are you accusing me?" Thus bringing the bullying into the open and complaining about it (respectfully) to the bully in the presence of others, allows management to act in one's favour, should the management wish to solve the problem in the first place.

One excellent solution to awkwardness at work due to a gay employee was suggested to me by a friend many years ago. It can work for any type of awkwardness around a certain employee. This can happen if the employee is eccentric, wears unusual clothing or is generally regarded as an "oddball". The boss or management can host a party in the honour of the gay or poorly-regarded employee. All the management and other work staff are invited. In the presence of the leadership and other staff, the gay staff member or "oddball" is complimented and treated well by the boss. The silent message given is that staff better get along well, or risk losing their jobs. However, it can also be viewed as an icebreaker. Thus it creates a means for all to overcome the awkwardness.

Another solution to awkwardness is through insight. Numerous times I have experienced frosty treatment by fellow staff (and students while I was a student). Of course, some of this could simply be due to prejudice (discrimination which is hard to address). However, there can be other possibilities, which experience has allowed me to provide as alternative explanations. Of course, I have no proof that any one of these is correct! In my opinion, being gay means different things to different people. Some people lead very boring and unsatisfied lives, although they would probably seldom admit this, even to themselves.

They may feel that the gay person could be having an exciting life, in secret, which they resent not being able to enjoy vicariously. Such people may wish to see a gay drag show, or go into a gay bar. However, they would never dream of going by themselves. When a fellow gay staff member is not openly gay, they may feel deprived of some excitement, even if just to talk about things. Likewise, having a gay person at work may be viewed as a means of learning about gay relationships. Other staff may assume that they are being deprived of meeting an attractive and charming same-sex boyfriend or girlfriend.

The more keenly a secret romance is suspected, the more attractive and appealing the hypothetical partner may be imagined. Thus, the greater the resentment, of course. In such cases, the problem is not so much actual prejudice but hurt at not being included in the private life of the gay staff member. Insight can allow a gay person to meet the unspoken desires of their fellow staff members. No doubt, action based on suspicions without evidence can easily backfire. However, when a gay person is openly gay (“out”) at work, secret longings to be involved (of fellow staff) can more readily be inferred through insight.

The present time, in which discrimination is much less common than in the past, offers another solution. If a person is not open about being gay at work, other staff may try to make it their business to expose the gay person.

I have experienced this during my time as a university lecturer. Surprisingly, it is not necessarily unfriendly. In the past (more than 20 years ago) I had been confronted in a rude manner as to whether or not I was homosexual. However, more recently (within the last four years) the social climate has changed. I could feel a silent pressure to be open about my sexuality. It is difficult to explain this.

However, staff would often comment on the problems of other gay people in my presence, such as by using the word “gay”. In some cases, I had been told that another man needed a boyfriend or was attracted to me but was not told by the supposedly gay person himself. It is likely that to desire to expose a gay person in this situation is due to concern for a gay or supposedly gay friend of someone else. Although I was not open about my sexuality to most people, due to fear of dismissal or discrimination at work, I perhaps should have revealed it. This may have helped many other people without affecting my job. Of course, if one decides to be openly gay at work where the social environment is friendly and thus enables it, one needs to address the issue of match-making.

In my experience, people like drama because it makes their lives more exciting. Thus they would like to see more happy couples, gay as well as straight. In my opinion, introductions are good but two gay people at work must not feel pressured to start a relationship or even be friends, if they do not wish to. Other staff (and university students) should respect that. However, it does mean that being openly gay can be easier when other staff appear to be in favour of it, secretly.

While driving a taxi two passengers told me similar stories about their careers. Both passengers gave me permission to summarise their stories in a de-identified form. Both of the men worked for conservative companies, which could well be anticipated to discriminate against gay men. Although their approaches to coming out at work were different, their work colleagues and the management were overwhelmingly supportive. In fact, one company had carried out its family-friendly work policy to the full, helping their gay employee relocate to be with his partner and even having a wonderful farewell party for him, thus making him feel special and accepted.

In one case, to come out at work one gay man first told a co-worker known to gossip. Once all the staff and management knew, the gay employee was simply open about his own life. In the other case, the gay man believed in this day and age there was no need to hide one’s gay identity. He had routinely come out at work in different places and found fellow employees and management to be supportive. Both men agreed that workplace management make the difference between good and bad experiences after coming out as a gay person at work.



Actually, what these two case studies suggest is that unpleasantness anticipated at work is largely illusory, so long as a gay person does not share his life with coworkers.

Many of them already suspect but don't really care. Any awkwardness can then be removed when a person comes out at work.

Another gay taxi passenger, who also gave permission to share his views, told of similar experiences but touched on an important point, that of age and discrimination. He was working in the hospitality industry and had mostly good experiences of coming out at work. Hence, improved situations after coming out.

However, this man also had been on a committee doing activities towards helping youth and said that there was an increase in hostility towards gay individuals amongst young people. He said that the phrase "so gay" used by young people in a descriptive sense was often intended to be insulting.

When he heard it being used after a public event and complained, given that he himself was gay, the person who had said "so gay" was sorry. Until then, the person using "so gay" had not seen any harm in using it as a term of insult. Although this example only relates to the use of language, it could reflect social change amongst youth.

In addition, in my experience and that of others I have spoken to, discrimination against gay people is more commonly carried out by members of the older generations. If they or prejudiced younger people are in the management at places of work, then coming out at work can cause problems. The best solution in this case could be to find another place to work. Quite possibly, discrimination against gay people as a common cultural attitude could be skipping a generation. What occurred amongst older people might just be re-emerging amongst youth.

If this speculation is close to the truth, then there couldn't be a better time to draw attention to the issue and allow anti-gay cultural attitudes to fade away naturally, as if they were out of fashion.

Choose recreational activities outside a career carefully

It seems out of place to write about recreational interests when discussing career issues. However, surprising as it may seem, they can make a difference because successful careers are often busy. Much of my own time is devoted to healthy pursuits, such as exercise; namely, three times per week for 1 ½ hours at the gym and 30 minutes almost daily for Tai Chi and Chi Kung exercises, which I have been doing for 16 years at the time of writing. This increases my capacity to be active and such activity can be good for a career but must be weighed against personal and career costs. Although fitness within one's capacity to exercise matters to all people, young and old, at my age (46), fitness seems to matter more than it would about 25 years ago. Less overtime at work can mean less success but less time with friends and a potential partner can bring loneliness. In my opinion, a slavery mentality is creeping in at work nowadays. Hence, if someone makes career over personal choices, his or her health and personal and family relationships can suffer. It is not my place to assert my own choices here but if one knows the risks, one can prepare for them, each according to his or her own values.

Obviously, health and relationships are important. However, voluntary activities and obligations must also be considered. Here, I am not suggesting that people be heartless and uncaring in order to have a successful career. However, it is worth explaining my own past choices. There are two reasons I do not play team sports now. Firstly, I have never been good at the team sports which were popular, such as football and cricket. Secondly, they take more time than simply going to the gym to keep fit. One has to be punctual at training and events and also participate in some voluntary activities. The same can be said for church groups. In the past I have discontinued attendance of several spiritual groups, including church groups, due to lack of time for commitments. Surprisingly, even though I was an active member (on committees), supposed lack of commitment gave rise to some unfriendliness from certain members, in a couple of cases a significant number of people. Furthermore, a couple of these groups were gay organisations! If one is with a small group, one can end up on a committee because there are too few volunteers. It may appear that the busiest people can be the most likely to volunteer. Bad treatment when one participates and helps, although not as much as others want, can hurt emotionally.

Here, I can give an example of voluntary activities with several Catholic charitable groups. I am not singling out Catholics, as opposed to other religions. It is just that I wished to help a Catholic friend out while I was a busy PhD student.

In two cases, people were distinctly unfriendly when I was present, for no obvious reason.

Yet I cannot assume it was homophobia (dislike of gay people). In one of these cases, I was helping to prepare snacks for people during a fundraising activity. Although several people were helping, I was singled out to chop a significant number of onions. Only when I had almost finished did someone hand me a pair of sunglasses to prevent tears from my eyes. In addition, the other volunteers were distinctly unfriendly at the time. This was not always my experience. After helping to mind a shelter for homeless men at night on several occasions, it was heart-warming to experience friendliness in the mornings from the Catholic nuns running the establishment.

As many dedicated and charitably-minded young people (gay and straight) may accumulate the same experiences with recreational or voluntary activities, I feel that I should give my opinion for others to accept or reject. If wishing to help others in any capacity, one first needs to know whether one is or is not able to help. If one cannot help but persists anyway, then one may not be able to help others as easily later. This relates to loss of many resources, including loss of money as well as time and even loss of life. In spite of writing this, I am not advocating selfishness here. Secondly, one needs to be prepared to be hurt by the very person or people one helps; namely, to have sufficient emotional and spiritual strength. If someone whom one trusts turns on one, this can hurt badly and one needs to be big enough to take it.

Younger people can be more trusting than older people and may not expect this. If one is busy, then I think it is best to choose organisations for voluntary activities, only where one feels a sense of belonging and experiences support. Hence, one should consider health, personal relationships, family and other commitments carefully in the light of career demands. They can all increase or reduce one's happiness and/or capacity for success.



Chapter 2 Coming out, intimacy, relationships and marriage

Coming out

“Coming out” is the phrase used for the change in lifestyle of a gay person who decides to be open about his or her preference for the same sex. An openly gay man or woman (“lesbian”) feels more comfortable in going to places where he or she knows other gay men or women can meet. Hence, gay men and women can go to places of adult entertainment, such as gay bars and night-clubs. In recent times, it also means access to dating websites. In general, coming out leads to a sense of relief for a gay person, as if a great burden has been lifted.

People who observe their friends and relatives coming out may not always approve. In my opinion, mainly the strong feelings of desire for sex provide sufficient motivation to face the issues involved in being gay. Even if a person can accept being gay, to be open about it to family members and friends requires a lot of courage. For many this might not happen until they are in a gay relationship. At this point, they may feel that their gay self-expression is so satisfying that they wish to share their happiness with others to whom they are close, even at the risk of rejection. They also then have a loving partner for support when open about being gay to their friends and family.

People may also come out in stages. In my case, I told my parents that I was gay when I was 14 years old. However, I did not accept my sexual preference fully until I was 21 years old, when I associated with a number of members of the gay community in a different city and came out properly. In my opinion, it is not necessary to leave one’s home city to come out. My personal story of coming out is provided in more detail in the following chapters. Firstly, in the one entitled “parents, relatives and friends”. Secondly, in the one called “mental health and self-harm practices, including suicide” (in the section with the heading “stress related to difficulty coping with being gay, mental health problems and suicide”).

One theme of this book is that a gay person has no choice about their preference for the same sex. This will be discussed in more depth in a later chapter. For now, if one assumes that a gay person has no choice about his or her feelings, then the pressure within to come out increases until it becomes unbearable, or alternatively a person manages to ignore this but then remains unhappy. Of course, the reason for any obvious unhappiness may not be guessed by friends and relatives of the gay person.

Of course, in this present day of increased tolerance, I think there should be less of such unhappiness. Therefore, I am writing this book. Next I wish to consider the issues which make coming out so difficult.

The range of variation between gay and straight

Firstly, one issue is preference for the same or opposite sex, itself. The Heterosexual-Homosexual Rating Scale (Kinsey Scale) is a concept from research on sexual preference.² Rather than dividing the sexually mature population into gay, straight and bisexual, there is a range from 0 to 6, with zero being totally straight and six being totally gay. Of course, bisexual would be wedged in the middle. This is true to my observations of gay and straight people throughout my life, including my own preferences. Although I am almost totally gay, I have occasionally fancied a woman. It must also be said that some people can be regarded as asexual because they have little interest in sex itself, although generally in good health.

The concept of the Kinsey Scale is important here for two reasons. Firstly, it can explain confusion over whether or not a person is gay or straight. Actually, it should not matter. However, with bad implications of being considered gay, people can be worried about being gay or just unsure if they are gay or straight. Therefore, confusion over sexual preference can lead to mental health problems or suicide, to be discussed in a separate chapter. Were people to accept their unique blend of preferences for the same versus the opposite sex as natural, even if not subject to change, then less confusion and stress should result. Preferences for the same or opposite sex are simply matters of desire or liking. It does not mean that an individual has to be controlled by them, so should not lead to panic. Thus, the first benefit of thinking about the Kinsey Scale is mental, avoiding confusion and the stress this can cause.

The second benefit of the Kinsey Scale is that it helps to explain how people with preferences for the same sex over the opposite sex can avoid expression of this in their lives; and also try to prevent others having close same sex friendships and relationships. If one can accept the concept that sexually mature people fit on a line somewhere from totally straight to totally gay, then it means that one person's liking for the same or opposite sex is likely to be different from most other people. This means that it is difficult to compare between people. However, people often feel the need to conform and share the interests and activities of their mates.

In my opinion, a major reason why one does not see many happy gay couples everywhere, is that individuals with a strong preference for the same sex are waiting to find a person of the opposite sex to whom they are attracted. Although this is not commonly talked about, it is something that can explain potential suffering in silence. Therefore, it is something to be included in my book, written about my ideas out of my experience.

Recently, a young gay man communicated this to me very clearly. With his permission, his comment is included in this book. He is a sporty man who likes the company of his mates. Although identifying himself as gay he is not 100% sure. Thus if he is "gay" he is waiting for a relationship to come out with support from his partner and if he is "straight" then his mates do not need to know about his experiments with guys.

In my opinion, many people view same sex preferences as only the basis for experiments until they find the one true love of the opposite sex.



My goal is not to interfere with the right of men and women to act in this manner, rather only to reduce anxiety and suffering. Although I have no proof that it is common, I believe it is. Even if such people assume their mates cannot tell that they are predominantly gay, I think that the mates often suspect it. Furthermore, I think that many men would be happy for their gay mate to find a nice boyfriend, or women for their lesbian friends to find a girlfriend (more on this in the chapter on women's issues). A young straight lady who was a taxi passenger during a night-shift gave me permission to pass on her comments. Indeed, she was pleased that I was writing about issues affecting gay people in order to help. The young lady agreed with me that introductions are helpful for people suspected of being gay. Although she had friends who she suspected were gay, she did not wish to talk to them about it so as not to upset her friends. However, she definitely had a caring attitude towards gay people. I understand that this is a controversial matter for me to write about, which a number of people might think does not reflect the truth.

The Kinsey Scale also helps to explain why some people may disagree with my opinions and would like to push their gay mates to get a girlfriend (for guys) or a boyfriend (for ladies). Let's say if one guy has managed to ignore his gay side but finds a nice girlfriend eventually, he might not understand why his mate wouldn't do the same. Of course, he cannot see things from his mate's point of view, which could cause some suffering for both men who are mates.

Society still seems to reward or favour individuals for opposite sex friendships and relationships. Thus my views here should not seem so strange, even if people would not all be of the same opinion. I understand that these are controversial matters for me to write about, which a number of people might think does not reflect the truth. However, if we all thought and acted the same way, the global village we all live in could be very boring. Diversity is good, I think. According to my education, differences of opinion are fine, as long as there is mutual respect. People then just agree to differ.

The pressure not to remain single

In this book it may seem that I am attempting to push gay men and women to act in a certain manner. However, it is not my intention. Rather, I wish to increase the options available to gay people, so they feel free to choose. Should a gay person wish to remain single, I believe that person should not be pushed into any form of intimate relationship.

Often it appears that discrimination against gay people in the past and even straight people now, is really directed at single people rather than related to sexual preference.

In other words, a handsome single young man or woman, especially when having a good income, is a resource not to be wasted. This notion is not new. In the famous fiction book *Pride and Prejudice* Jane Austin writes, "It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife."³

Thus, from what I have observed, a single man or woman may experience social pressure to find a steady partner or to marry. This occurs regardless of whether or not he or she wants to be committed to someone else at that point in time.

For one thing, people feel it is so sad that an attractive, rich, successful or just nice man or woman is not with someone. In my experience it is not just sadness expressed but there can be nastiness as well, should the single eligible bachelor or lady not comply.

Another but related issue is one of trust. People often distrust single individuals, I believe. Especially so, if the single man or woman is attractive, earning well or has a charming personality. It is seen to be wrong for that person to remain single. People may not only think there is something wrong with the person, rather he or she may be perceived as a threat. Strangely, if the attractive and eligible bachelor or lady were to wear unfashionable clothing (looking like a nerd), even that may attract disapproval.

It is something which I have experienced. For example, at times when I was too busy at work to hunt outside work for a gay partner. Due to discrimination, it was too difficult to do this at work. Therefore, I simply experienced unpleasantness and remained in these workplaces at different points in time. I was dedicated to busy career jobs, rather than giving up the career, having more free time and going out more to find a partner.

A trivial example can be shopping for groceries. Supposing I am wearing my trendy clothes to the supermarket and want to look for fresh and cheap fruit, such as apples, of which there are many boxes or trays on display. Then suppose a little girl is hanging about one of the boxes or trays. If I get closer, the adult accompanying her (such as her father or mother) would move closer to the little girl. Hence a single person who looks as if he or she should be with someone can be perceived as a threat. A trendy couple is less likely to attract attention, in my opinion.

Sadly, I feel that the converse may also be true. If a person is plain-looking, older or not appearing to be well-off, then he or she may simply be ignored at work or elsewhere. He or she would not be seen as worthwhile to be in a relationship with, or even perceived as a threat in my opinion. Alternatively, a disfigured or supposedly “ugly” person, or a person who looks poor may be distrusted. Villains in the movies can be cast as ugly. People are quick to judge by appearances.

Really, these social situations are not helpful. People are not trustworthy or untrustworthy because of their appearance, or whether or not they are accompanied or unaccompanied. Therefore, I think people should feel free to remain single until they are ready to be committed. Furthermore, which man or woman a person is committed to or whether gay or straight, should be up to the individual to choose without social pressure.

Attraction itself is a very personal thing, I believe. Explaining myself here, I have often been surprised at which people seem to be attracted to each other. It is not that I stare at couples a great deal. Rather, it is that at the age of 46, I have had many opportunities to notice couples while minding my business in the course of my activities. To observe things, I did not have to try too hard.

One implication of the personal nature of attraction, together with the concept that people can have a range of preferences from gay to straight, is that people should feel free to befriend other men or women, according to their preference. Otherwise, couples may not be happy together unless they can learn to like each other. However, it would be sad if this were the main way for couples to find happiness.

Another implication is that there is hope for the lonely. Even if a person feels unattractive or unwanted, there may be someone out there who is a good match and might make that person feel special. It is not that I am a romantic at heart. It is simply that it is worth persisting in the game of love unless a person has a good reason not to persist, or chooses not to do so, I think.



For example, a person may feel too set in his or her ways to compromise and thus accommodate to the lifestyle of another, sad as this might be. In my opinion, this is more common with older people (such as myself). However, it should not be up to others to make that choice for them. In all cases I am for empowerment of the individual over the masses, when it relates to constructive lifestyle choices.

Dating

Dating is difficult if people do not feel the freedom to express their feelings for the same sex. In addition, without introductions from mates or friends, they cannot even be sure who else is gay, or who might like to date another person of the same sex. A number of young people who were taxi passengers on my night shifts told me that introductions from friends were important in dating, whether gay or straight. In fact, the helpfulness of introductions was the most common point of agreement concerning dating for gay people. Yet in my experience, introductions with potential matches do not usually occur. Perhaps, the awkwardness of arranging this prevents most people from trying. Of course, it is difficult to do this tactfully, without appearing to be pushy. Attraction and affection are personal and one cannot tell if two gay people will have an affinity. In my opinion, if two gay people are naturally fond of each other and feel sufficient freedom to express this, then displaying social acceptance of this should be less awkward and one can tactfully encourage them to date.

There are a number of options available for gay men and women who wish to date each other but do not feel free to date people at their places of work or study. For example there are gay venues (such as night-clubs and bars) and internet dating services, such as Grindr™. However, in my experience dating online can be difficult and frustrating problems can occur. For example, people may chat online but one cannot always be sure that their motives are sincere. In my opinion, first meetings are best arranged at a neutral location, such as a café. One reason is safety. For example, once inside the home of another person, one is more easily forced into unpleasant situations involving that person or any number of additional people who may unexpectedly be there. Furthermore, people can change from being friendly to being angry and violent or abusive, if their needs or desires are frustrated. Hence, being surrounded by other members of the public at a neutral location reduces these undesirable risks. Of course, problems with dating services can be experienced by gay and straight people. Nonetheless, I am sure that many people have found good matches through dating services and any means of dating is better than none.

Without coming out as a gay person, it can be difficult even to find the courage to enter a gay venue. Once there, a gay person may still remain alone or feel lonely or vulnerable. Any bad experiences early on can cause a gay person to give up and avoid seeking other gay friends or a partner of the same sex.

Hopefully, writing this book will provide encouragement to make it easier for gay people to meet each other, without the need to go to gay venues or use dating services. Hence, gay people can still go out to enjoy the night-life or chat online with a gay friend but do not have to do this just to avoid feeling lonely. Ideally, gay people should be able to be open about being gay and make friends with other gay people at their jobs or places of study. It is usually much easier to make good friends with people one knows well, than with strangers. Furthermore, I think relationships can be genuine with greater certainty when one makes a friend first, before a lover.

In a later chapter concerned with health and beauty (“looking good on a low budget”), I write about topics relevant to dating; namely, personality, making conversation and grooming. Dating with peace of mind also involves some other issues.

People usually like being called by name and having their names remembered. This is easier for some people to do than for others. I am particularly bad at remembering names and try to turn a person’s name into mental images I can use as a mnemonic. Just merely giving attention to it probably helps me commit it to memory. One can also try to use a name in conversation often, to reinforce the memory.

For example, “You look nice/handsome, Frank. What did you do today, Frank? ...Frank, I’m going to order/buy a drink/green-tea/and-a-vegetarian-wrap/and-garlicbread. What can I get for you?”

Perhaps not, “Do you come here often, Frank?”

Whichever way one does it, one should at least try to remember a name to ensure more success in dating. A major reason not to remember a name is not to hear it in the first place, so I have been told. If not said or heard during an introduction or if a person mumbles, then one may not feel comfortable about asking later. One can make a point of asking for a name early (if not said or heard), or apologising and asking if a name is forgotten, twice even! In my case, as I have a bad memory for names I may make some self-deprecating comment (such as, “How silly of me but I have forgotten your name...”) and ask again. Definitely avoid using the name of another date by mistake, especially if the person knows him or her and even more so if that person is very good looking! This may not be as funny as it appears. Please do not take offence at my comments here, especially if you mind if or when other people forget your name, as I only wish to help others.

To end on the theme of names, I wish to provide a quotation from Shakespeare’s romantic and tragic play *Romeo and Juliet* (II.ii)⁴ because the words are very beautiful:

...What’s in a name? that which we call a rose, By any other word would smell as sweet;

So Romeo would, were he not Romeo call’d,

Retain that dear perfection which he owes, Without that title.- Romeo, doff thy name;

And for that name, which is no part of thee, Take all myself!

Should one be as charming as Juliet in Shakespeare’s play, a date should go well, for sure!



Another issue can be handing over money or phone numbers and other contact details. It goes without saying that contact details should be passed on with caution, to avoid potential harassment (even if one expects this to be rare). If necessary, a mobile number may be best to give a stranger, in my opinion. Even then, only if there is sufficient trust. It is also clear that one should not part with money too easily. However, it is easy to be conned, especially if one has feelings of love and affection or just attraction. Perhaps make good excuses until one really knows a person better, should someone ask for money or other items of value (I have had experience here).

After refusing, if one never hears from someone again, one can tell oneself that this could even be a blessing (even if little comfort). Even worse disappointments could occur after parting with money or valuable items for the first time, at the request of a stranger being dated. However, many strangers can be really pleasant to get to know (as on my taxi shifts) and for most people I am only stating the obvious, I am sure.

Dating is associated with taboos; practices which are simply not done or talked about, even if for no obvious reason(s). For example, dating a person whom a friend or mate has dated previously seems to be something which is not done or which people avoid. Young people whom I spoke to about this agreed but opinions as to why were not clear. One comment was that the mate (straight guy) might still like the same girl he had separated from before. Then one could lose a mate (due to jealousy). Another young man said that it was related to pride because the mate (straight guy) had separated from his girlfriend, then passing her on to a mate or friend would be like giving second best. This was something a mate should not do. The same young man who said this and gave me permission to pass on his comments, thought that this taboo was disappearing because sex is easier to get. It is possible that reasons for taboos can be complex. I think it is important to examine them, where they have no obvious reason(s), to ensure constructive outcomes for all people.

Intimacy

A number of taboos are associated with the topic of intimacy, the desire to be emotionally very close to another person, which can cause feelings of guilt and anxiety. Taboos can change. An example is smoking tobacco, which used to be totally acceptable but in many cases is now disapproved of. A taboo may be good or bad and in this book I am trying not to be moralising. Intimacy is a subject which many people thought should be discussed in this book. Comments made by young men and women (gay and straight) are provided here because much has changed since I was much younger. It is hoped that these comments will help other young people to make their own choices in life. In providing these comments and writing about intimacy and related areas, I have the over-riding intention of helping others cope with difficult issues in life and make decisions by themselves. Where possible, I am also writing from my own experience, in order to help others. However, in the area of intimacy I am not an expert and do not wish to be taken for one. Some material within this section and related ones which follow may be confronting. If so, I apologise and suggest that you skip these areas, should they have no relevance to your own life or those of relatives, friends or other people close to you.

However, if they are relevant, I wish you the courage to deal with the issues well and hope that these sections are helpful to you.

Openly gay friendships are still taboo, although it is something occasionally seen in public. One problem with secrecy surrounding gay friendships, for whatever reason, is that it discourages intimacy. If gay people only feel the freedom to meet in secret, then they are not likely to seek or have a relationship because it tends to involve community recognition. Hence, it often means coming out to the family of each partner and close friends, at least. The fact that I was in a relationship while working overseas in a biomedical research position was something I did not discuss with my work colleagues, yet I believe some or even most of them suspected it. I was seen with my partner a number of times; he phoned me at work and I would often go to spend the whole weekend with him before returning to work on a Monday morning.

It caused some awkwardness and could well have been the subject of gossip. Relationships usually get the attention of friends, family and the community. After all, people like drama and to see a happy couple. If it is a happy gay couple, then the absence of a need for secrecy removes one barrier to intimacy.

As stated earlier, material for this book was supplied by young men and women who gave permission to include it. By incorporating views, opinions and comments of young people, I hope to make this book more relevant to the issues of young people everywhere. Of course, there is much scope for disagreement by readers. Therefore, I am hoping that readers will be patient with me as I try to discuss issues where similarly open and frank discourse seems to be difficult to find. This book has the potential problem of statistical sample bias that case reports have. In the taxi, a couple of ladies even said that I needed to speak to people living in different areas, such as north versus south. Wealth or lack of it could make a difference too, such as by its effect on lifestyle choices. Most of the taxi passengers who discussed issues with me were straight but were happy to provide comments relevant to gay people. Indeed, it was universally thought that discussions of this nature should be more common and in the open. Hence, this confirmed my notion before writing this book, that clarification of sensitive issues was required. The topic of intimacy has a number of such issues and my presentation of material provided and comments mostly relate to both gay and straight people here. Where a statement is provided from a young person, it is normally because one comment represents all; thus, is typical of responses from others with whom I had spoken.

There seems to be a divide between young people (indeed, perhaps people of any age), over those who only want sex and those who desire a closer interaction with another person; hence, intimacy. One young straight man told me that some guys wanted a girlfriend for intimacy and some just for sex. So-called “meaningless” sex only has no intimacy. Furthermore, he said that women can expect guys to be “one night stands” (he himself preferred intimacy). On the other hand he also said that ladies can also want guys for regular sex without commitment. He said that it is the nature of the individual person that determines whether he or she will want just sex or love. However, he thought that the upbringing of a person and the people with whom he or she mixes determines the extent to which sex is for enjoyment without any commitment. In his opinion it was better not only to meet people at night-clubs because of the risk of superficiality (sex only). Indeed, I think that many people who would readily have sex with any one individual are just as likely to do this with others. This means care must be taken to prevent sexually transmitted diseases such as HIV (please see “safe sex” information in the chapter on HIV). It also means that a person seeking intimacy rather than sex only can easily be upset, emotionally. In my opinion, many people may choose to accept sex only in life, assuming that they have no choice or that it is expected of them in order to be liked or popular. It can be just as bad to have frequent sex only but want love, as it would be to want sex only and be involved in deception due to one’s sexual needs.



There are many myths and beliefs surrounding sexual performance and desire amongst men and women. They are not necessarily untrue but they can give rise to separate cultures relating to sex and intimacy, shared by certain men and women. As this can be cause for much unhappiness, I shall discuss a couple of them here. The young man who told me that guys differed in their wish for a girlfriend for intimacy or only for sex, related a couple of common beliefs. Firstly, that most women have a weaker sex drive than guys. Whether or not it is true for most people, women can definitely have a very strong sex drive, at least certain women I have met, even though I am a gay man.

Another is that a guy doesn't get the feelings, rather "feelings get to him", as if it were less natural to have such feelings than if he were female. Another is that there is a hormone that makes women fall in love but guys do not have this hormone, so would not respond the same way. It also implies lack of control by a lady for the desire for intimacy ("love" in this case), whereas a man should normally be in control of this desire, should it occur for any reason. As I cannot tell the extent to which these beliefs in differences between men and women cause them misery, I think that clarification of the science of sexual responses can help. Of course good communication between individual men and women who are dating or just meeting, would help even more.

Sexual responses are associated with activity in regions of the brain and circuits, much as wires connecting regions of a circuit board.⁵ Hormones (chemicals acting distantly via the blood) and neurotransmitters (chemicals communicating between brain or nerve cells) are involved. However, much research is needed to clarify this. The circuits which make sex so enjoyable and exciting can be termed "reward circuits". Similar action of reward circuits may be involved in addiction to many (if not all) "recreational" drugs. This also causes much suffering, so is discussed further in the chapter on drugs, including alcohol. The mesolimbic pathway in the brain has a major role in experiencing sexual pleasure and dopamine is a major neurotransmitter for this. However, the same reward pathway is important in other experiences of pleasure, such as enjoyment of successes or achievement, food and drinks, exercise; as well as a euphoric "high" caused by many "recreational" drugs.

Sexual responses in people can be considered to have three aspects; namely, sex drive (libido), getting excited and erections (arousal) and climax (orgasm), in males also together with ejaculation of sperm within semen. There are also changes after sex and these can be related to bonding or experiences of "love". However, even if there are differences in wiring of male and female brain areas, there are common mechanisms taking place.

The actions of male and female sex hormones (testosterone and oestrogen, respectively), dopamine and other natural substances act on a lower centre of the brain (hypothalamus) to increase sex drive. Both males and females have erectile tissues responsive to sexual stimulation in the nipples and sex organs.

Erections during arousal involve other natural chemicals, associated with a pathway not under direct conscious control, called the autonomic nervous system ("parasympathetic" division of it). Medications such as Viagra®, Cialis® and Levitra® maintain male erections by affecting one of these natural chemicals.^{5,6} However, I am sure that enough rest and good nutrition can also help promote male erections in many guys, except where there are emotional or psychological problems; greatly reducing reliance on these medications. I think that in many cases men do not have sufficient good quality sleep and below optimal nutrition (a controversial issue, I am sure).

A sign of emotional or psychological causes could be the presence of erections during sleep or early in the morning on waking (thus, normal physical condition) but not on demand. Communication between sex partners during sex and/or a counsellor can help if there is an emotional or psychological cause in lack of erections or premature ejaculation (with very little arousal or stimulation). Women and men have physiological changes of the body involved with arousal.

Orgasm in males and females is associated with feelings of intense pleasure. Dopamine is one neurotransmitter responsible for this. Just as the autonomic nervous system controls erection, so it controls ejaculation (the other division, “sympathetic”). Interestingly, the hormone and neurotransmitter prolactin inhibits sexual desire and is increased after orgasm, possibly reducing the ability to experience orgasm frequently in a short space of time without waiting. Females seem to be able to do this more easily.² Dopamine inhibits prolactin^{5,6} and oxytocin may be involved in emotional responses, such as bonding. Furthermore, both prolactin and oxytocin (as hormones) also have reproductive functions in females which do not occur in males, related to childbirth, milk production and release.⁶ This is an oversimplified view of sexual responses but is intended to show how male and female responses are very similar in many ways.

Clearly, intimacy is about more than sharing sexual pleasure of various types, even if it is included. This is something I have had conversations about with a number of young men and women, within the context of discussing it for my book. People with whom I discussed this universally agreed that sensitivity, or receptiveness of a person to feelings and the capacity to share this was a major factor in the desire for intimacy. In other words, if people had sensitivity, this encouraged intimacy with them. Although emotional sensitivity can be considered to be an aspect of personality, I think it is something which can be consciously developed but I do not wish to discuss this. In my opinion, it might be better to discuss intimacy and the nature of shared activities because there are cultural aspects which can change to allow more people to experience intimacy, if they wish.

A young straight man with whom I discussed intimacy and sex in the taxi, said that people open up to each other when they are in a relationship; letting each other know what they like. This can include sexual activities regarded as “kinky” because they are unconventional, even if they are harmless and simply done for sharing of pleasurable feelings.

He mentioned the fact that a number of young ladies revealed that they had anal sex with their boyfriends. He said that people will negotiate sexual activities but might avoid kinky activities because people might mind. In my opinion, people may also fear rejection by their sex partner after revealing desires for kinky activities. This can include harmless fetishes, such as the desire to smell underwear worn by others or strong attention to certain objects during sex, such as shoes. Sufficient trust can help people negotiate sexual activities. Trust could be lacking if people did not know each other well or were not in a relationship, or if they did not open up to each other (as the young man had said).

According to the same young man, young ladies are still anxious about masturbation, or deriving sexual pleasure by oneself without a partner. Research data suggests that more men do this than women.² Masturbation allows harmless release of intense sexual desire, which could otherwise be disturbing or troublesome, yet is very much a social taboo area. Masturbation also allows people to learn about the response of their bodies to sexual stimulation, so they can use this knowledge during sex with another person for intimacy, such as within a relationship.



Soon I shall provide comments by others to indicate how this is important.

Motivations for having sex, other than the desire for intimacy, can vary. Another young straight man who was a taxi passenger on a night-shift gave me permission to write about his experiences, in order to help others and improve life for many young people. He told me that he had dated more than 50 women between the ages of 15 and his early twenties but had been in about four relationships. He said that he considered himself addicted to sex, if it meant wanting it but not getting enough sex.

As I thought he might have been used for sex by women, I asked him if he cared about being used for sex. He said that he did not care, only the sex itself was important. He said that the emotional attachment was gone and he just needed sex, so masturbation was just as good as sex with others. He agreed with me, that some guys enjoyed the excitement of chasing after ladies but said that he was numb to such excitement.

However, he also said that sex with someone whom one loves is much better. Others had said similar things to me. For love, perhaps one can substitute the words “have feelings for”, meaning desire for intimacy.

Interactions within a social context were discussed with young people. The young man whom I had mentioned previously in the context of intimacy spoke to me about differences in language used to refer to sexually active guys versus ladies. Whereas “cunt” (slang for female external genitals, including the vagina) is derogatory and usually applied to females, “sick cunt” or “mad cunt” when used for males is a casual term of praise, even apart from anything related to sex. Whereas ladies who have sex with others outside a relationship are disrespected, guys who do this are simply called “players”, which earns them respect amongst other guys. Although not polished Oxford English, this is common language amongst young people. A gender difference between males and females is clear. Anyway, I think that gender differences are similar to other social divisions; such as rich versus poor (“social class”), black or Asian versus white (discrimination where it occurs), young versus old. They reflect the way people treat one another, based on cultural values at a certain point in time.

The young man I spoke to thought that young people get clues on how to interact socially and sexually through shows like Jersey Shore (the American reality television show) and Geordie Shore (the British version). Thus, gender differences in how men and women should behave towards each other, violence and other unpleasant forms of behaviour could be being encouraged. In my opinion, such shows still serve the same purpose as ancient Greek plays and Italian operas. Throughout civilisation, people have been searching for guidance on how to relate to one another (usually concerning men with women). Dealing with jealousy is an example. Jealousy can be so strong that people will commit murder or suicide because of it. Indeed, I personally know of cases where this has happened! Furthermore, horrible murders in murder-mystery fiction shows and books often deal with such emotional motives. I think that people like to see familiar scenarios, such as people going out to night-clubs or getting drunk. Therefore, rather than view such television shows as a way of corrupting people, whether or not it is the case, I think one can view them as reflective of reality for people. Whether or not such programmes can help people process or deal with similar situations in their own lives, they indicate areas where people may have difficulties or confusion.

Social and sexual interactions are not straightforward (obvious, without question, or a given thing) and can be dictated by culture. Thus, instead of sex being for pleasure, intimacy or deliberately having a baby, it can have other purposes for different people and cause difficulties or confusion. Two people can have sex but view this differently. For example, sex can be just out of friendship, to keep the peace, out of obedience to others (such as in an arranged marriage), due to boredom (to pass time), out of compassion (another person is desperate for sex), with a partner (boyfriend or girlfriend) who wants a third person for group sex, or just for love. In my opinion, the last reason is the most satisfying but mutual love and attraction are difficult to find, for gay and straight people.

Making a case for intimacy

As I write about intimacy, one would assume that it is natural for men and women to fall in love and not much need be said about intimacy. In my opinion, this is not the case. Many people have problems with intimacy or do not value it over casual encounters. In my discussions with people I have met in the previous months, including during the planning of this book, I have realised the great suffering the topic of intimacy causes, not just for gay people. Not facing being gay and avoiding to come out as a gay person causes very strong pressure within, as I have already written earlier.

If ignored, this causes unhappiness. In my opinion, avoiding these issues often gives rise to strong feelings of desire and lust. When an individual is finally able to deal with this, he or she may choose to avoid intimacy for reasons other than a perceived need for secrecy due to being gay. In other words, lack of intimacy becomes a lifestyle choice.

In this section of the chapter, I wish to present a case for intimacy because I believe it can satisfy a number of human needs at different levels, for any two people who choose it. Other than perceiving a need for secrecy myself, I avoided intimacy with any other man for many years because I did not happen to find the right match. Being somewhat eccentric and a nerd, I did not feel much harmonious bonding with most of the other gay men who I randomly met. Of course, to be intimate with another person, one needs to be a reasonable match. It is what many people call “chemistry”. Mutual attraction is only a part of this, I think, although for most people I have observed the process of finding a good match is mainly instinctive.

If a good match is present and there is no perceived need for secrecy, single men and women may still choose not to go further. Possible reasons may be habit, failure to value intimacy or bad previous experiences. In truth, I think that a number of people experiment with intimacy before committing to a partner who appears to be a good match. However, I do not wish to consider people who play with intimacy (even as a part of personal growth) before truly committing but rather those who reject it.

Obviously, if society in general, friends, family or the local community do not support intimacy (such as between two gay people), then it is much less likely to occur. However, even if there is good support, people can still reject intimacy. This applies to straight and gay people.



Around the time I started to write this chapter, a young straight man discussed this with me in the taxi. He granted me permission to relate what he said in this book. He previously had had at least 20 casual encounters with women but was not currently in a relationship. The satisfactions of many casual encounters could be sufficient not to go further or to want intimacy. It can be like an addiction to alcohol or other drugs. Although I personally have not experienced that, we both thought that such an addiction could be like a hunger that is never satisfied, no matter what one does to appease it. The young straight man was thinking about starting a relationship with a nice lady, although he had not met the right lady at the time we spoke. However, he doubted whether he would be able to commit to a relationship, as he felt that now he could not value intimacy. Having casual encounters with ladies had become a habit for him. This provided unique satisfactions, although he acknowledged it was not an addiction. He could find women with a similar inclination.

Although straight, the young man could understand men who had casual encounters with many other men, due to similar feelings.

We discussed the situation and both thought that one way out of the habit cycle was to date ladies only with the intention of going further. Hence, a straight man could plan not to date any lady who only inspired short-term attraction. In other words, a man could choose to date only ladies with whom he would like to be intimate in the long-term. The habits this young man had established caused him to doubt that he could commit to such ladies who held prospects of a relationship for him. None-the-less, the thought of breaking the habit cycle of short-term liaisons motivated him. A couple, gay or straight, firstly need to want intimacy. They need to keep an interest in each other alive above the competition.

Perhaps, it is good to write about the threesome here. A couple may make a choice to have sex together but also include a third person. All three do not necessarily have to be gay. For example, a couple could both be bisexual and include a man or woman who may not be exclusively gay or straight. Possibly, the third person might just be curious about gay sex, without really being gay. This group sex could occur occasionally or regularly and both or only one of the partners might want it, even if they both agree.

Both partners might love each other deeply, so it does not have to signify a problem in their relationship, I think. Such a relationship is called an open relationship because it is open to others for sex. Although an open relationship can also mean consent to one-on-one sex which happens outside the relationship (and it can bring HIV into the relationship). Indeed, I have seen many gay couples seeking a threesome and am sure many motives for this exist. Even though I might be unpopular for writing this, I believe that open relationships can work. However, I think that both partners have to know each other very well and have very similar attitudes to it (both wanting it).

During my discussions with young people on my night shifts, the concept of “soul mate” frequently arose, in the context of intimacy or love. In other words, one could have sex with a random stranger who is a soul mate and then fall in love and then stay in love, hopefully. One could go further and believe that every person had just one soul mate and one was destined to find him or her and then be happy until parted by death. People differed in their beliefs about this. Whether or not one believes in the soul mate concept, I think that two people are not totally compatible and relationships usually need work to keep a couple together. Therefore, I think that it is risky to involve a third person for sex in an open relationship because he or she might just happen to be very compatible with only one member of the couple. However, I still believe it is a personal choice.

Casual sex for pleasure only can be considered in a similar way. Even if innocently done for fun only, one can still fall in love or desire intimacy. If this happens unexpectedly, it can cause suffering if the other person only views the sex as for fun. Although a person might be more likely to desire intimacy if he or she has casual sex for fun only with the same person a number of times, it could happen on the first occasion with one person. Gay people are at risk who do not feel that they can approach others whom they like, such as at places of work or study.

In order to date, they might go a night-club or date online and can easily encounter people who only want sex but no commitment. Indeed, the person met for sex may be in a situation where it is difficult to “come out” or be open about being gay. Hopefully, these social norms will change with time. None-the-less, it is important to know oneself well and what one wants, I think.

In my opinion, honesty helps prevent such pain but even then, two gay people may intend to have casual sex but only one might desire intimacy or love afterwards. Indeed, this desire can be very intense but then so might the desire for sex only, without commitment.

Addictions can spoil plans of people to obtain pleasure and can make intimacy difficult. If a person knows that he or she is at risk of addiction, then steps could be taken to avoid it. However, I think that it usually takes people by surprise. Addiction to drugs (including alcohol) is considered in a separate chapter but different addictions have common features and there is what is termed “addictive behaviour”, which can include compulsively seeking sex and gambling (where people can lose all their money). While considering addictive behaviour as generally involving the mesolimbic reward pathway of the brain together with dopamine release in the nucleus accumbens is controversial, there may well be similar changes in the brain as with addiction to various drugs.⁵ Either way, once an addiction has developed, it is difficult to reduce the craving which is part of it. A person may or may not try to address the addiction, partly depending on the effect it has on his or her lifestyle and how much suffering it causes. Great motivation (and probably help) is required to forego any emotional reward experienced, or periodic relief of frustration which keeps the addiction in place.

To make a case for intimacy as being worthwhile beyond many problems, I think that one can consider things or people that are special or cherished. Therefore, one can choose to like something or someone, purely on the grounds of uniqueness; in the case of a couple, where there is mutual attraction and common interests and values (a suggestion given to me).

Conditions for this include being noticed by someone first, getting to know and like the person and wanting to commit oneself to him or her. I think that these factors are relevant for intimacy between gay and straight people. Then there can be a certain excitement to find out what brings joy to another, sexually or in any other way, which is unique to each person; two people knowing that they share secret and privileged knowledge about what brings the greatest possible happiness and joy to both of them, exclusively.



Relationships and marriage (straight and gay)

People who are in love with each other may decide to start a relationship, having sex and being intimate with each other, in preference to other people. Of course, gay and straight people can have relationships. The young straight man mentioned in the previous section on intimacy, who had dated over 50 women (having a lot of sex) and had been in about four relationships, gave me his views on the requirements to fall in love. Firstly, one had to be emotionally and sexually compatible.

Secondly, one had to have a lot of good sex with one person only. He also said that if one thinks that a potential partner has had this with others, then one would not want to have a relationship with this person. He said that he gets jealous, just like many other men, which is a barrier to wanting a relationship with a person. The young man said that most of the women he had dated had mental or emotional problems, which presented another barrier to relationships.

The other young man I had discussed intimacy with in the previous section had said that guys only respect other guys who have a lot of casual sex (are players), not women who do this. I think this view is commonly held by straight men and is an example of gender differences mentioned earlier.

A player need not have a girlfriend, which is better than hurting a lady. He said that the meaning of life is to reproduce but sex is for enjoyment, although this could be for pleasure only or intimacy. Furthermore, if one had feelings for a woman (desired intimacy), this was better. Then one did not have to force oneself to have sex with her, presumably just to win respect from other guys. The man who spoke to me about this was a person who preferred intimacy and had no difficulty to find women at a night-club willing to have sex with him, but not necessarily intimacy.

The same young straight man thought that a straight person should find a match of the opposite sex but a gay person should find a match of the same sex. Otherwise, biological urges for sex would pull the relationship apart. He said, "Nature tells things as they are."

In other words, that homosexuality was something one could observe in nature (practised by different species of animals) and also was something one could not ignore. Although rarely discussed in such detail, I found that many other young people had a similar acceptance of homosexuality. Yet I believe that discussions like this are not common even if they can be helpful; hence, being summarised in my book. Universally, young men and women with whom I had these discussions (on night-shifts in the taxi and elsewhere), felt that there should be more such discussions, in general. These would have the potential to reduce the suffering of feeling the need to conform to destructive social norms, with or without gender differences. When people feel the need to do something destructive, which they do not even want to do, it can be a barrier to good relationships, gay and straight.

Trust is a major barrier to satisfying relationships, according to the young straight man I just mentioned and other people. In fact, he said that trust was the most important thing in a relationship. The young straight man who had dated upwards of 50 women and with about four relationships told me that if he thought a lady had sex with another guy, then he would not trust her.

Then even with the right lady for a relationship, this was a sufficient reason not to have it.

Therefore, I asked, if he met a woman who was trustworthy but simply going through a phase where she was having sex with many other men, would he contain his jealousy and wait for her to turn to and remain with him. He said that he would but doubted he could find a trustworthy woman. This man had parents with a poor marriage and according to him, this amplified the problem relating to lack of trust.

He briefly gave me his background and kindly gave me permission to summarise this in my book, for the benefit of others. Broken marriages are now quite common. His parents split up when he was about 10 years old. They were good to all the children but hated each other. He did not believe marriages work and thought this view was common amongst young people (hence, being discussed in this book which actually focuses on issues of young gay people). He had a conservative parental background, yet the marriage did not work. He said that this was the best case for marriage success (to justify his viewpoint) and yet it still did not work. He first had sex at 15 years of age and had no knowledge of the girl as a person. Indeed, he had sex with her only for his ego, just as he said that many other guys do. As a result of his experiences, he did not want a girl to go through this with guys.

This young man wants his own children, eventually. However, he would rather be single and adopt children than marry first. Now he does not trust women.

I asked this young man how to make marriage work, in his opinion. He said that one needed a trustworthy woman; faithful but who also liked “great sex”. He thought that such a lady was hard to find. The young man said that he had met a lady whom he trusted but that sex was a problem. He also said that with another lady, sex was so good that he fell in love but he did not marry her because she was untrustworthy. He was not good enough for her and she did not want to marry him and have children (he did). At this point, I can imagine that some female readers may have objections and I have deferred writing about my discussions with women (straight and gay) to the chapter on women’s issues. The young man I spoke to thought that people should be older when they marry, so that they have experience first. When asked what age, he said early 30s (maybe around 32 or 33). Otherwise, he thought that they may argue and have other bad things happen in a relationship. According to him, the commitment might be too hard, anyway.

He thought that a marriage with a family (living in a house with a white picket fence) like in the “American dream” was horrible. He thought that old couples were married and set-up but not happy. He thought that marriages generally meant there was fighting and that married people were “kidding themselves”. They had all the trappings but no love, maybe just to be socially acceptable. He thought that such couples had a boring life. Having used the phrase “life imitates art” (discussed by Plato and Oscar Wilde),⁸ I gather that the young man had thought deeply about this situation and possibly the potential to change the life of people in the world for the better (not just for the worse) by means of art or literature, maybe even this book. Given my conversations with other young people, I gathered that such unhappiness could be common; thus, should be written about in this book in order to reduce suffering. It makes me disappointed to think that unhappy marriages may be common nowadays, as my own parents had a very happy marriage and I know many other people who seem to have had them. As the issue of trust seems to be important to young people wanting to have relationships, let alone marriages, I can relate the experience of another young straight man. He also gave me permission to include it in this book.



This man had been dating a local woman and had found contract work overseas, being due to return to his home country in a certain number of months (less than a year). They flirted and communicated often via Skype™ (internet-based video messaging system). It was assumed that they would be reunited on his return. To his astonishment, she had been seeing another man in the months that he had been away, working overseas. Hence, she now just wanted to be friends rather than anything more. Basically, the other man had supplied what she was missing, which is why she appeared to be less keen on young man she originally had been dating. Even if such innocent explanations exist, a guy might always be able to incorrectly assume that a lady is untrustworthy, when a reasonable explanation can exist. Hence, communication by a lady is really important, not assuming that a guy will or will not think in a certain way. Furthermore, when two people who are dating are temporarily separated by distance, temptations exist for both people dating to have sex or intimate friendships with others. A lack of honesty on each side undermines trust and creates a barrier to a potential relationship when the dating couple are reunited.

This young man gave me his opinion on the requirements for a successful marriage. As with the other young man about whom I have written, he said that a woman had to be trustworthy and that good sex was important. However, he also said that a man had to provide security for a woman in a social sense and make her feel sure that he could look after and provide for her. Hence, a woman who wished to marry a man needed to share similar interests and attitudes.

When she married him, she needed to feel sure that she would become part of his social circles, of a nature to which she wanted to belong. In other words, if they both liked outdoor activities, then she would also become part of his outdoor clubs. As they grew together in their marriage she had to continue to be sure that he could meet her needs.

This is in agreement with the observation that woman will tolerate male unfaithfulness and double standards, as behaviour that modern culture might call typically masculine (“mucho”) can make women feel that they are with someone who can protect them and provide security. This is the sort of rough and dominating behaviour which one might see on the popular reality television shows, Jersey Shore and Geordie Shore. There might also be silent pressure on males to engage in this behaviour, from their male mates and females they know, depending on the nature of their social circles. Of course, this is just my speculation.

The other young man about whom I had written earlier, who had dated more than 50 women and been in about four relationships plays in a football club. He said some interesting things about sport which he was quite happy for me to share in this book. He said that most people play sport to feel good and it also gives them confidence. This helps their relationships. He said that good sportsmen get the ladies. When they play sport they naturally experience this. I asked him about gay people and sport. He said that traditionally sport is very homophobic (at least from a male perspective). However, if someone were to come out as a gay man, all people would just accept it.

Most mates would be happy about it. However, he said that people just would not come out.

Surprisingly to me, one theme which commonly arose during my discussions with young people in the taxi on my night shifts was gay marriage. Young people I spoke to were universally in favour of it. Although I usually did not discuss their sexual preferences, I assume that most of them would have been straight. Typically, I would tell them about my book and my intentions to help others, ask them for permission to include their comments and ask questions. Most young people thought that gay marriage would greatly help acceptance of gay people, so that they would feel more comfortable in coming out within the social circles they usually mixed. Personally, I am for gay marriage. Men and women who love each other, whether gay or straight, should be able to marry, I think. However, I did not understand why it should make a difference to social acceptance of gay people, so I asked about this.

The answer I received on a number of occasions was that it would legitimise being gay, that it would have official approval in society if gay marriages took place legally. Perhaps many people are trying to understand how to fit in to society and what roles to play. Therefore, they will go to great efforts to deny their true identity to be able to conform, socially, unless it is really obvious that certain ways of being or behaviour are “OK”.

Confronting material has been presented by me, reflecting the existence of many poor marriages and how it is difficult to find people to trust. Indeed, many people have confirmed these views. Of course, this is not proper research. None-the-less, I thought that the comments of young straight people were of sufficient concern to summarise relevant examples and discuss the issues, although the focus of this book is on problems which concern young gay people.

However, I do acknowledge that the timing of marriages may not be ideal (such as too early or due to unexpected birth of any children) and nowadays there is much stress on married people that can cause marriages to break apart. Both married people may have to work or struggle financially. They may be exhausted and have little time for each other. Romance and love need a great deal of time to keep alive, I find. Certainly, this was true in my own long-term gay relationship, until it ended. In any case, I think that a married couple have to believe that marriage can work to try to make it better and stay together. Anyway, I have never been married, so I do feel strange writing about these things. Hopefully, people can identify with points discussed in this book and thereafter be better able to make their own lifestyle choices.

Religion appeared to be an issue of concern, so I am addressing this in a separate chapter. In my opinion, there is no need to invalidate marriage as a result of difficulty in accepting religion completely without question (which I assume most people do not). Spiritually, marriage can sanctify a relationship between two people who love each other. Thus, the earth, ocean, sky, winds, sun, moon, planets, stars and any power which can give meaning to the existence of them can make holy the bond between two people in love (to complete their happiness). Of course, this role of marriage will not be for everyone, I am sure.

Marriage serves other purposes. One is territory. Wearing of a ring by a married person and the visible presence of a husband or wife makes it clear to others that the person is not available for sexual advances, thus to “back off” (especially, if the husband or wife is big and strong). Then there is also not even any perceived right to fight, potentially reducing violence (which can happen over unaccompanied ladies at night-clubs). Another is duty of care to any children (offspring and adopted) from the marriage. The typical modern or “Western” culture is focussed on ownership, what is “mine” or “yours”.



Thus, someone must officially be responsible for looking after children. In societies or groups where everything is truly communal and everybody can take care of the business of anybody, such a requirement would not be essential. In my opinion, true marriage is not represented by a document (marriage certificate) but is written on the heart. This is the reason why I was so interested that young people thought that gay marriage could induce great social change for the better.

Building trust

This section on trust was not originally going to be in this book. This could be surprising, given that trust is so important. Indeed, trust does not only matter to people embarking on a relationship and pursuing their careers (as has already been mentioned) but in many other aspects of life. At the time of editing this book for release online, a young man indicated that a section on trust could be important and would be consistent with the aims of this book.

The possibility exists that certain people really want to be trusted by others but think they are not. It is also possible that certain individuals know they are not trustworthy, for whatever reasons such people may have, based on their past experiences or otherwise. By no means an authority on trust, I will attempt to do the subject justice.

It is likely that being able to trust or indeed break any habits one does not like takes time, so patience is essential. Honesty is vital to trust.

There is no point to lie because another person can check to determine the truth of a matter. In any case, the truth is simpler and does not require a good memory! However, one may be honest but others can be suspicious of one's motives. Human beings have good reason to be suspicious because life brings problems and people fear traps and being cheated. No, I am not naïve and these things do occur! Therefore, a person should be transparent about all major issues.

In other words, one should inform others without being asked on issues one thinks are relevant or important to the circumstances at hand. However, if this is done for all issues, including minor ones, it can be irritating and is unnecessary. For example, if a person is separated from a partner, he or she could admit to feeling lustful but say (in all honesty) that he or she is not seeing anyone else. If nothing is mentioned, one partner may wonder why the other is not also feeling lustful or whether an affair could be taking place. Suspicion can lead to mistrust. The awkwardness of discussing personal feelings one does not usually talk about can make it difficult to mention such things. A climate of mutual honesty builds trust.

One can also prove that one is trustworthy. If one is honourable in matters which cause worry to others, this shows that one is worthy of trust. Helping out with things also strengthens trust, even if mostly with issues of little significance. One must help when there is a major crisis or emergency. Failure to do this in the absence of a good reason can destroy trust quickly. If there was a good reason not to help, one should reveal it even if unasked. One should not assume another person will know, or that it is useless. The good reason to do this is always there! Embarrassment here could destroy a friendship or relationship. It is also worth mentioning that people do forgive. However, they do not normally forget interactions suggestive of untrustworthiness. Once trust has been undermined, it is hard to win it back. Alternatively, when two people are united by a firm sense of trust in each other, this is a very strong bond indeed!

In my opinion, it is best not to promise things. Obviously, the future is uncertain and it is not good to set up possibilities to disappoint one of two people, either way one acts (such as due to lack of money). It is often easier at a point in time to promise something and not fulfil it later, especially if another person asks for a promise. Indeed, it is difficult to remember promises if there are too many. Perhaps, promises can be made with something important (such as marriage vows) and life is often set up this way, so it is hard to avoid anyway. It is possible not to ask for promises and this can avoid much unnecessary disappointment. However, if one always shows that one is trustworthy, people do not need promises, certainly not empty promises. Therefore, if one has made a promise, one must keep it to ensure continued trust.

Perhaps, inner aspects of trust are equally as important as outward signs of it. Communication is important, especially in relationships. Each person must feel trusted and trust on each side should be made known. As the young man who thought this section should be in the book mentioned, the trust that another person has all that is needed to be in a relationship with, needs to be communicated. Furthermore, even if this does not go as planned, the willingness to work through issues must be communicated.

Another point is that one's view of the world can be affected by one's thoughts and feelings. If a person is dishonest or untrustworthy, or just overly suspicious, such an individual could easily see opportunities for dishonouring trust. By trying to be trustworthy and exercising due caution without indulging a suspicious nature (if burdened by one), it is easier to trust others. When inner and outer aspects of trust are in order, with people who are trustworthy, the resulting couple or team is very stable to pressure by unexpected events in life. Indeed, the nature of true love is eternal.⁹



Chapter 3: HIV virus transmission and safe sex

A major aim of writing this book is to lessen the amount of misery in the lives of young gay people. Wherever possible, I am attempting to address major issues which are common to people who are not gay or even young. One such issue is transmission of the Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV), which is associated with the deadly disease for which there is no cure at present, Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome (AIDS). Hence, the common use of the abbreviation “HIV/AIDS”, the virus written along with its disease. Although this book is not a guide, rather being related from my own experiences, I think that it must provide a source of information to answer important questions which young gay people may have. It is understood that one can always find such answers from other sources, such as books on topics such as HIV transmission and prevention. However, if explanations are given in this book, then deaths can be prevented without the need to read elsewhere. A book covering areas concerning gay youth is ideally a stand-alone resource for dealing with major issues, meaning that the reader does not have to seek elsewhere. In writing this, I must emphasise to the reader that my education and training was never in medicine but rather in various sciences. Hence, this book is not a source of medical advice. However, it is responsible for me to address major topics concerning HIV/AIDS.

Helpful sources of online information are provided as references. They are a website of AIDS.gov¹⁰ and relevant websites of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC),^{11,12} both of the Government of the USA. These resources help me to ensure that I do not go off the track to cover irrelevant information. These references are essential because I do not have classical medical training. In providing the references, I acknowledge that there may well be better ones, although I have chosen them because they cover essential points and are clear. Furthermore, I must state that the organisations which made the information available on the internet are not associated with this book, so do not necessarily share or support my views. As the reader can see, I am already prepared for complaints. Neither is it favouritism. In the area of HIV/AIDS, there are many experts. An expert and man I greatly respect told me that an expert is someone who has made all the mistakes that one can make already, so can teach or help others who have not yet made these mistakes. In addition, I think one can recognise an expert because he or she makes something incredibly difficult look very easy. Therefore, when one has a go by oneself, one wonders how the expert could do it. This is not showing off, as it is so natural that if asked, the expert would say that he or she cannot see any difficulty; just do this and that and then it is done! How mortifying to someone who aspires to excel in a given art! Research on HIV/AIDS by experts is continuing and with time better information should become available.

In addition to it being relevant to young gay people, HIV/AIDS was of personal interest to me. At the time (late 1980s) that I was doing a science degree at university, HIV/AIDS was a common topic in newspapers and on TV. When I read or heard sentiments like AIDS was the plague sent by God to destroy gays, or even just that God sent AIDS as a service to mankind, it obviously aroused strong emotions within me. The HIV virus does not discriminate between gay and straight people and will infect both equally, provided that the conditions needed for the transmission are there. Furthermore, if ignored for prevention by education and other means, treatment and research, far more people all over the world will be infected with HIV. Indeed, millions of people already are infected by the HIV virus, especially in Africa. When I started to do very well at university, then I felt motivated to do research which could make a difference to the HIV/AIDS area. My PhD research was in an area of immunology related to HIV/AIDS.

Infection by a virus

A virus is a special type of infectious agent. It is not a classical living organism, in that it needs to be inside a living cell or organism to make more copies of itself (reproduce). It is basically composed of nucleic acids, such as DNA (although HIV is an “RNA” virus), surrounded by packaging to protect it from destruction. Nucleic acids, such as DNA, form a master plan (“blueprint”) of living things. Therefore, if the virus can get its nucleic acids inside a living cell or organism, the resulting copies will resemble the original virus. When copies of the virus spread, then an infection is taking place.

A virus needs a target

Viruses do not infect randomly. They have targets. Common to biological sciences is the concept of the lock and key. Hence, one item resembles a key and another is like a lock. When lock and key meet, an action happens. Hence, the action does not have a random cause because the lock and key were there together. Living things are composed of cells, like a wall is made up of bricks. Indeed, some simple living things are made up of only a single cell, like bacteria. This is helpful in nature, so that living organisms of an enormous variety of sizes and types can exist, like many buildings made of the similar bricks. Cells forming living things have receptors on their surfaces, like the locks in the classic concept of lock and key. When something meets the locks, like a hormone (chemical messenger) or a virus, an action happens.

When the virus meets its target receptor, it enters into the cell and infection takes place.

HIV infection, AIDS and why it is difficult to treat

When the Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) binds to its major target molecule, called “CD4”, it can gain entry into its target cell.¹⁰ The main target cell of HIV is called a “T” cell. T cells can remember infectious agents to which they were previously exposed and help to organise the immune system to defend against those infectious agents. Hence, when diagnostic tests check for T cell counts, they are looking for loss of T cells from the blood, namely T cells in the blood with CD4 receptors for HIV on their surfaces. Loss of T cells from the blood with CD4 on their surfaces is so reliably associated with progression to Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome (AIDS) that no other diagnostic test is essential to provide a diagnosis of AIDS in someone known to be positive for HIV virus by testing for it. As T cells bearing CD4 help to control the immune system, without treatment their loss usually leads to death due to characteristic diseases when immune function breaks down in AIDS. These diseases are called opportunistic infections because people with normal T cell counts and a healthy immune system do not usually suffer from them but a weakened immune system provides the disease-causing organism or agent with an opportunity to infect and cause disease. Although only a small percentage of T cells bearing CD4 are infected by HIV, a full explanation of the loss of most T cells with CD4 on their surfaces cannot yet be given (more research required).

It is well-accepted by scientists that the HIV virus causes the disease AIDS. The evidence for this is overwhelming, even though certain individuals may claim that there is no absolute proof. However, let one assume that it is better to be free of AIDS by preventing the HIV virus entering the body.



The search for even better proof is still important, however. Finding proof for their beliefs (hypotheses) is motivating for scientists. Without the importance of a reasoned debate, the search is less motivating. Having more motivated scientists in the world leads to advances in technology, including health sciences and medicine. Let us hope that these advances are positive, so that we do not destroy the world with ever-improving technology!

Like many viruses, HIV can be latent inside a cell. This means it is not actively making copies of itself (reproducing) all the time. Indeed, the nucleic acids of HIV become part of the DNA of its target T cells. There may be no visible sign to the immune system to defend against, when HIV is simply inside its target cells but no sign is on the cell surface. Treating cells to get rid of HIV in the body is a problem because it is harmful to remove all the target cells (the body needs them) and it is also difficult to determine which cells are infected. Without removing all HIV-infected cells from the body, it is impossible to prevent new HIV infections of cells. None-theless, there is a therapy using medications active against HIV which can postpone progression to AIDS for many years, if not a lifetime. HIV is a type of virus called a retrovirus. The therapy is called Highly Active Anti-retroviral Therapy (HAART).¹⁰ However, it is not a cure to AIDS because HIV remains in the body and this therapy is expensive, with many unwanted side-effects. Prevention of HIV transmission is by far preferable to relying on treatment, until such time that an affordable cure is available and even then perhaps not.

HIV transmission

Passing on the HIV virus to another person who can potentially have AIDS later, is associated with the cold clinical phrase, “exchange of bodily fluids”. Yet not all bodily fluids are able to transmit HIV infection well.¹¹ Blood and semen (of males) can transmit HIV very well but HIV can also be passed on by transfer of breast milk and fluids from the rectum and female vagina. Saliva exchange is not considered to be an HIV risk and neither are faeces, urine or fluid from the nose. Hence, the riskiest bodily fluids to exchange are blood and semen.

Especially risky activities for passing on HIV are sharing needles or related equipment (such as syringes), anal sex (receiving the male penis more so than inserting it) and also sex by inserting the male penis into the female vagina (“straight sex”). However, there are a number of other ways of transferring HIV infection, such as from mother to child at the time of pregnancy, birth or from infected breast milk. While oral sex (by mouth to and from sex organs) can potentially transmit HIV infection, it is considered to be low risk. Risk is increased where there are cuts or sores in the mouth or if HIV-infected semen is taken into the mouth. Passionate kissing has a negligible risk of HIV transmission but is subject to technically increased risk with cuts and sores (if infected blood is transferred). Exchange of saliva is not considered to be an HIV risk. Of course, increasing the number of people with whom a person has sex (at the same or different times) increases the HIV transmission risk statistically, in a similar manner that buying more lotto or raffle tickets increases the chance of winning. Risk is a function of the type of activity and how frequently it occurs.

There are other activities where HIV transmission is unlikely or impossible. Transmission through medical procedures or transfusions is not worth considering in developed countries because of rigorous testing for HIV infection, such as of blood from blood donations. In fact, refusing medical help or a transfusion when necessary, anywhere in the world, is more likely to lead to death, potentially much more quickly than due to AIDS.

Blood donors can save lives but if a person has HIV infection, it goes without saying that he or she should not give blood, as HIV is transmitted by blood and HIV-infected blood would be rejected for medical use after testing. Sexual transmission of HIV poses a much greater risk than medical procedures and transfusions. It is highly unusual but possible for gay females (“lesbians”) to transmit HIV during sex. If two ladies regularly have sex with each other, one of them is more likely to be infected with HIV if she has sex with an infected man. Hence, “bisexuality” increases the risk for women.

Unreasonable fear causes much suffering where a family member, friend or acquaintance has HIV infection. Social (affectionate) kissing, casual touching, shaking hands, eating food prepared in the usual fashion by someone with HIV is not a risk. Being scratched by an HIV-infected person, sitting on a toilet seat or being bitten by a mosquito do not pose risks. HIV does not remain infectious for long, away from the body, nor can it multiply there. A little knowledge can dispel much fear, so people can have casual social interactions with HIV-infected people and enjoy the company of one another without fear or paranoia.

HIV prevention

It is not difficult to prevent the transmission of HIV and this eliminates much suffering later. The biggest tool to prevent HIV transmission is education, very important with a preventable disease for which there is no cure at present. Some information is included in this book, so that one does not need to say after the event, “Ah, so that is why I/so-and-so got HIV...” Although the references provided here and many other sources have information on HIV prevention, the author did not think that the reader should have to look elsewhere for information important to a gay person coming out, or anyone who could be sexually active or at risk of HIV infection. Although it could make me unpopular to write about it in this book, I think that if lives can be saved, it is justified. Some suggestions are made here which one may not read in many other sources, to reduce the risk even further.

Ideally, any sex involving the male penis should require use of a condom as a barrier to transfer of blood and sperm (so-called “safe sex”). There is also a female condom for use by women. In writing about condom use, I acknowledge that oral sex poses a low risk of HIV transmission, higher if infected semen is deposited in the mouth or there are cuts or sores in the mouth. Furthermore, I would expect it to be unusual for anyone having casual sex with a total stranger to use a condom for oral sex only. I have to write courageously that people who plan to have sex with strangers should prepare themselves beforehand. The sexual organs and rectum (for rear entry) have mucous membranes which can easily be torn to release blood, allowing blood and semen to be transferred more readily. Of course, as stated earlier, transfer of HIV-infected blood and semen pose the greatest risk for HIV-infection. Hence, the importance of using a condom for penetrative sex, where a penis is inserted (gay or straight).

Practical suggestions about condom use can be offered, in case of possibilities which could prevent condom use during sex with a stranger, who may or may not have HIV infection. Firstly, one is courage. It can be uncomfortable for a person who is not used to this to buy or carry a condom or pack of them. However, nervousness at a supermarket, fuel service station or pharmacy checkout counter is not as bad as risking HIV infection. If feeling nervous, perhaps shop for condoms with a trusted friend or relative, or talk to them about it beforehand. It is best not to rely on friends to pass on condoms on a routine basis. Friends may feel taken advantage of.



In any case, a sexually active person should take control of condom supply and usage.

Secondly, a condom is only able to prevent sexual transmission of HIV if it is being used. Confidence is important not only to buy condoms but to insist on their usage. Some people may request a person having sex not to use a condom. If this is a condition for sex, then it is better to refuse and walk away. Here, a reader may be puzzled as to why I would even bother to write this. However, I think that if one person fancies another to a great extent, he or she may wish to agree to unsafe sex (without a condom). This is more likely if a person has only just come out or is inexperienced. Risks accumulate, so I think it is better not to take the risk, even if thought of as small on one occasion. Confidence is needed to insist on condom use during sex with a stranger, or to refuse to have sex if this is not an option given.

A practical consideration for sex is comfort. Use of a water-based lubricant (such as K-Y® or Wet Stuff®) together with a condom during sex reduces abrasion making sex more comfortable. This can also reduce release of blood from tissues and subsequent HIV transmission. It is best not to use a non-water-based lubricant, even if it is easy to obtain because it weakens condom rubber (latex).

Examples of a nonwater-based lubricant which should not be used with latex condoms are petroleum jelly (Vaseline®) and oil. A small percentage of people (2%) may be allergic to latex (such as common dishwashing gloves), having a rash, or an itchy or irritating response to condoms containing latex. Affected breathing can also occur but more serious reactions are rare. Condoms are available for purchase without latex as an alternative and this is stated on the packs. Although alternatives to water-based lubricants are possible, such as silicone-based lubricants, or other lubricants for nonlatex condoms, when inexperienced it is safer to rely on water-based lubricants for routine use. Furthermore, water-based lubricants should not cause problems anywhere, even if inadvertently borrowed by someone using standard latex condoms.

Another issue relating to comfort is condom size and shape. Use of a condom which is too small can lead to the condom splitting during use. In contrast, a condom which is too large can dislodge, necessitating use of the fingers to retrieve it from an anus or vagina (not desirable). Trying condoms of different sizes and shapes (which vary with the brand) allows a sexually active person to find one which fits best, increasing comfort and reducing risk of HIV transmission. Here, it is not helpful to rely on the condom manufacturer alone. Packs of condoms are unlikely to be labelled “small”, “extra-small” or “short” because this is bad for selling. Furthermore, condoms labelled “large” may be smaller than a person imagines. By implication here, the author is not boasting. Practice on one’s own erect penis (if male) without a person can be helpful if inexperienced. Regardless of the ideal size or shape, a condom should be used. Any condom for penetrative sex with a stranger is better than none.

If a person is in locations where sex with a stranger can occur, it is important to take care with alcohol or other drugs. Under the influence of such substances, it may be possible to have unsafe sex, potentially without being aware of it, or even without remembering the event later. If a person considers that he or she may tend to use alcohol or other drugs to excess, to the extent to which judgement or perception is significantly affected, then it is safer to avoid using them at all in locations presenting some risk. This may seem harsh but it is written here because it might not be considered until after such an event has occurred at least once (when it could be too late).

Abstinence, comments by others to avoid sex and faithfulness to one partner

Abstinence means to abstain from (do without) sex. Indeed, this would prevent HIV infection by sexual contact. However, the drive to have sex is usually strong and abstinence is not practical for most people as a long-term measure. Therefore, gay people who have not dealt with their desire for sex can be at risk of infection with HIV or other sexually transmitted diseases, when unusually intense urges to have sex cannot be suppressed and safe sex practices are not known. Abstinence is often recommended by people to others because it is easy to say but it can be difficult to do.

Far more practical is to find just one person to love and have sex with; hence, a partner. Having a steady sex partner can satisfy emotional needs, as well as the urge to have sex. However, choices made by people are complex and compatible partners can be difficult to find. Therefore, knowledge of safe sex practices is essential and advice to abstain from sex without this knowledge can lead to HIV infection and subsequent sorrow for all.

Prevention of HIV infection risk from use of injectable drugs

Intravenous drug use should also be mentioned here. Needles and syringes can be used for medical purposes, such as insulin delivery for diabetics, so the presence of a needle and syringe on a person need not cause panic that someone who uses “recreational” drugs is present. Furthermore, addressing issues associated with drug use is a complex activity and some relevant topics are discussed by the author in the chapter on use of drugs (including alcohol).

The sharing of needles and associated injecting equipment, such as syringes, is amongst the highest risk practices in transferring HIV infection. Injection of drugs into a blood vessel, including those used for medical purposes, is normally into a vein (intravenous). Although the puncture of skin with a needle (so-called “needle stick”) has a low HIV risk associated with it, the risk is greatly increased when blood is transferred.

In order to test whether a “recreational” drug can be injected into a vein or would be wasted, an intravenous drug user would typically pull out the syringe plunger before injecting the drug in. This ensures that the needle is inside a vein before injecting because veins can be hard to find (visible blood goes into the syringe barrel). In contrast, the author is popular with phlebotomists who take blood for testing at clinics because his veins are massive and easy to find. When the next intravenous drug user shares the injecting equipment, blood from the first user will go directly into his or her vein, which has a high HIV infection risk. To prevent this, a fresh needle and syringe should ideally be used by each individual. If the needle and syringe are sterile (without germs) in a sealed pack, this also prevents other infections. Of course, use of new injecting equipment each time increases the cost. However, cheap household bleach can be used to destroy HIV and other (but not all) infectious agents before used needles and syringes are reused.^{13,14} One factor associated with use of “recreational” drugs can be apathy and lack of self-care. If this stops a person from reducing his or her risk of HIV infection, then friends or their contacts should try to help. After all, this reduces the overall risk of HIV within communities due to transfer of HIV-infected blood from one intravenous drug user to another.



Used needles and syringes should be disposed of in “sharps containers”. Needles should never be recapped at their ends because there is always a small risk of puncturing one’s fingers. In addition, needles should not be removed from syringes before disposal, to reduce the chance of contacting infectious agents. There are metal boxes for syringe disposal in many toilets. These are typically yellow and marked with biohazard symbols for infection risk. Other puncture resistant containers can also contain sharps to prevent needle stick injuries.

Hepatitis vaccination and testing for sexually transmitted diseases

Sexual activity with a number of people and/or intravenous drug use are major risk factors in hepatitis infections. Indeed, hepatitis can be more easily passed on than HIV virus infection but not as easily the “common cold” or a flu, as it is not spread through casual social contact. Therefore, there is no need to shun contact with people who are unwell (unnecessary “paranoia”) and no doubt the world will be a friendlier place because of this. Whereas sharing toothbrushes or razors is not a good idea; sharing plates, spoons and other utensils used for eating should not be risky (not that many people might do this). Easier transmission is partly because the hepatitis virus can survive outside the body for a time. Here, one can consider hepatitis A, B and C and risks and transmission vary for different hepatitis virus types.^{15,16}

Viruses causing hepatitis lead to liver disease making people feel sick but can cause chronic (long term) liver disease and death, especially in the case of hepatitis B virus infection. In general, risk of hepatitis A infection is mainly due to eating contaminated food but can also be transferred by ingesting faeces accidentally (assuming here that most people do not do this on purpose).^{15,16}

Hepatitis A infection can thus be a risk when travelling. Hepatitis B infection can have serious consequences but is preventable with a very effective vaccination, normally also for hepatitis A in combination. All sexually active people, not only those who are gay and people working with blood products should be vaccinated against hepatitis B. However, hepatitis B infection can be passed on from mother to child during birth and is more common amongst certain groups of Asian people and in sub-Saharan Africa. Hepatitis C infection is a major risk factor if sharing needles and syringes for intravenous drug use. Unfortunately there is no vaccine and treatment with interferons takes a long time and can have unpleasant side effects (not ideal). However, there is a blood test for hepatitis C. Testing for hepatitis C can be done in conjunction with other sexually transmitted diseases including HIV.^{10,11}

The new rapid HIV test may not detect some cases of HIV and can also give false positives (wrong diagnoses) but results are available much faster than the standard test done in a laboratory. To facilitate a correct diagnosis, one should wait for three months after a risky sexual contact for antibodies to develop, which can then also be detected by the standard HIV test in use. In general, too few sexually active people are being tested for HIV at present. If more people who are sexually active are tested, there is a greater chance of reducing the spread of HIV within communities.¹⁷

Chapter 4 : Women's Issues

Much of the material and ideas presented in this book concern topics of potential interest to young gay men and perhaps gay men in general. Actually, I found it more difficult to discuss highly controversial topics with women than men whom I met. Many of the conversations relevant to this book I had while driving a taxi. Quite frequently, young women were accompanied by a man or another woman and thus they were more interested in having a conversation together than one involving me.

As a taxi driver, it is mostly inappropriate to ask personal questions but when I am asked such questions first, it is easier to introduce my book in conversation and seek opinions and gain information. Far more commonly, young men asked me such personal questions than young ladies, making it easier to discuss issues, although from a male point of view. An example of such a question to me is, "Do you get offers for sex while driving the taxi?" I could then say "yes" and in a very general manner discuss the awkward situations which can occur when driving a taxi. My emotions in these situations usually included feeling flattered by the attention. Needless to say, I am only human and also subject to being tempted to do what I should not. It is understood that I wish to keep the private activities of people and their own business confidential, whether when having discussions with taxi passengers or writing this book. Of course, there is a code of conduct for taxi drivers and it was quite normal for me to mention how we are expected to behave on the job. Another example is, "What does your wife think about...?" (this or that issue). To such a question, the nature of which was often very broad, I could explain that I am not married and really gay rather than straight. Again, this would enable me to introduce my book and discuss certain topics.

However, it is important to address issues related to gay women (lesbians), specifically. Furthermore, in the process of finding out information relevant to this book, I discovered a number of issues relating to interactions between straight guys and ladies which were important, such as those that relate to intimacy. Some of these issues can also affect bisexual people, thus such matters do not only concern gay or straight individuals. Hence, I considered that these issues should be addressed too, where appropriate throughout this book. Therefore, it seemed fitting to include a chapter in this book just devoted to issues relating to women. Indeed, this highlights topics of importance to gay and straight women without them being lost amongst so many general and seemingly male issues.

Education and equality for women and men

In developed countries, education of men and women is usually reasonable. Therefore, many issues relating to sexuality (such as pregnancy) need no explanation in this book because many people understand the basic processes involved. However, in cases where education is poor, many problems can arise. People can potentially feel a sense of inferiority because of a lack of education. This need not be due to deliberate decisions about who is to receive an education and who is not. Women and men have biological differences which can lead to misunderstandings without sufficient education.

Periods and any associated period pain, which men do not have, are examples of biological differences between men and women where some education gives an enormous advantage. One can only imagine what a woman could be told if there is menstrual blood because of a period and she wishes to know why, if no explanation such as the following one can be given:



After a female is sexually mature, an egg cell (ovum) is released approximately each month (at “ovulation”). To prepare the uterus (womb) for the egg cell (ovum), the lining from the previous month is first shed, releasing blood during the natural process of menstruation and this occurs more or less regularly once per month until no more egg cells are left to be released. Instead, a woman could be made to feel guilty or inferior because of a discharge of menstrual blood or any period pain. Such misrepresentation of the truth, whether by accident or on purpose, can lead to inequality between women and men. Therefore, I believe that basic education is important to the issue of equality for women and men.

Should any ladies reading this book not understand basic biological differences between women and men, then I think that it is good to have such knowledge. Most people reading this book should have it, so it is not included in this book. However, many reliable sources of information over the internet can be checked, or anatomy and physiology textbooks which can be viewed in a public library will also have such information.

The basic biological knowledge which I think is empowering for females concerns the female reproductive system (with its organs), the female reproductive cycle, pregnancy and childbirth. Without the natural processes of this female biology and the function of the normal male reproductive system (with its organs), humanity and all its eventful history could not have transformed the earth! Issues relating to HIV infection and safe sex to prevent HIV transmission were discussed in a previous chapter.

Gay ladies (lesbians) and freedom of self-expression

Two ladies can love and/or feel attracted to each other in the same way as two guys, or a lady with a guy. Occasionally, I have discussed issues which relate to young gay women (lesbians) with them. Relevant descriptions of the current trends in society and relationships between two ladies are best included in this chapter.

According to young gay women with whom I have had discussions, currently there is much more freedom for them to express their sexuality and have relationships with each other than in the past, in general. Two young gay women I told about this book were happy to provide comments and gave me permission to include them in this book. They said that conditions were much better for gay ladies now than five years ago. Previously, a very feminine gay lady could easily be asked why she is a lesbian because she is so feminine, but not now. Hence, many people might have assumed typical gay women to be masculine. People used to have a stereotyped view of lesbians but society has changed greatly. It appears that social acceptance of being gay is better for lesbians than gay men. The young women said that barriers for lesbians now are due to the law and the government, rather than society. Indeed, unjust anti-gay laws and governments hostile to gay people in certain countries have a major role in oppression of gay women and men. This is discussed by me later in a chapter on the gay community and support organisations. When I asked why they thought that the changes had taken place in society, they said that it was mainly due to the media. Perhaps seeing lesbians leading their lives and gay parades in the media helped people to see that lesbians were normal people, just like straight women.

After mentioning my previous experiences at work, the young gay women I spoke to said that lesbians in the workplace nowadays are usually accepted by straight people and their friends. In fact, it can be a bigger problem for a lesbian not to come out at work, when others already suspect she is gay. The young women agreed with me, relating to my experiences and silent pressure to come out at work, a situation entirely different from that in the past. It seems that now that many people accept gay men and women, they cannot see why they should wish to hide their sexuality at work or elsewhere. Although social acceptance of lesbians presently seems to be even better than for gay men, according to the young gay women I spoke to, many lesbians are still reluctant to come out (even to their friends).

By writing about these issues in my book, I am hoping that people can enjoy their careers and relationships with their friends and fellow staff more, regardless of their sexual preferences.

Masculinity, femininity and relationships of gay ladies (lesbians)

The young women also said that although there are fewer problems for lesbians in general, there are more problems with masculinity and femininity. Hence, I thought there might be a need for role models. However, the young women said that at least because being lesbian was now socially acceptable, there was no need for role models. Maybe adolescents might need them but once people were adults and had self-expression, they were fine without role models. In my opinion, masculinity itself may cause confusion to males if considered apart from the context of a straight couple, so I shall discuss it in the next chapter of this book.

In the gay community, “butch” is a word used for masculine and “femme” for feminine. The two young gay women whose comments I have put earlier in this chapter were both feminine. However, I also spoke to two young gay women who were very masculine in their manner and appearance. They gave me permission to put their comments in this book. They also agreed that straight and gay people accept lesbians well now, better than five years ago. However, they said that ladies are still categorised as lesbians if they are butch (masculine). These assumptions were not made in an unfriendly way, like judging the ladies. Therefore, I asked them whether there was social pressure on lesbians to be either butch or femme. The young women said that there was no pressure to act a part, one simply acted how one felt. It was easier to be butch because no explanation that one was lesbian was needed. When I asked one of them why she got her tattoos, she said that she just liked to have them (not to be butch). The ladies said that they were just naturally butch. They said that some lesbians are femme but all are accepted by other gay women, gay men and straight people. Hence, there is freedom and acceptance to be butch or femme in the gay community. Then I asked the young butch women about lesbian relationships. I was interested to know how they dealt with male and female roles. They said that one partner did not have to take a male role and the other a female role. They said that role divisions might be useful at the start of a lesbian relationship, to decide who does what. However, later in the relationship each partner just does what she feels like doing. Then they each do certain things. It appeared that male and female roles were not important in relationships, even if women had a preference to be butch versus femme.



Opinions of young straight women about straight guys and women dating them

This book has been written mainly to help young gay people with their career and lifestyle choices. In writing this book, I have attempted not to lose my focus on gay issues. However, as I wrote in the introduction to this chapter, there were areas of concern which were not specific to young gay or straight people and others which concerned young straight people but were of importance, such as intimacy. These areas of concern and their extent only became clear to me after a number of discussions with young people on my night-shifts driving a taxi. In discussing issues which apply to interactions between guys and ladies, it is necessary to consider opinions from women's point of view, not just that of men. In the section with the heading "relationships and marriage (straight and gay)" of the chapter entitled "coming out, intimacy, relationships and marriage" I passed on comments by young straight men relating to problems they had finding women whom they could trust. Anticipating objections from ladies reading their comments, I stated that I would write about my conversations with women in this chapter on women's issues.

Young women I spoke to did not necessarily see that there was a problem with women. They felt that there might be quite a great deal of variation and it might depend on the region where women resided and their socioeconomic status, making it difficult to obtain a clear resolution of the problems between young straight men and women. They felt that guys often just want to use women. A couple of young straight women I spoke to gave me permission to pass on their comments. They said that when they speak with guys, most of their conversation centres around what the guys did with ladies. The young women considered themselves lucky in their own lives, with the guys they had met. They had been brought-up with high standards at home and believed in waiting for the right guy. When I raised the possibility that women may be having sex with many different guys, they said that one hears about this sort of thing but guys might be exaggerating. They did not believe that many women are making themselves available to many guys just to secure a boyfriend they like. Yet, they thought when ladies do that, it is probably because a guy first cheated on them, so then they think it is fine to cheat on guys. The two young straight women I spoke to said that ladies in general just want to be treated with respect but acknowledged that they could not speak for other women.

This paragraph and the next one have been added less than one week before I finished writing my book. Even at this late stage I had not yet spoken to women having sex with many different men, nor asked them (politely) for their opinion on this matter. Therefore, I considered it proper to seek to find an answer for the readers of this book, which undoubtedly could include many women. Being free on a Friday and Saturday night at this time (obviously, when many people are free to go out), I went out to straight night-clubs for a few hours each night. There I wished to try to find an explanation for major issues that had concerned men who previously had made comments for my book. Readers can imagine the awkwardness for me as a gay man to go to straight night-clubs alone, to ask women about their sexual habits! Although I had asked friends if they could go out with me, they did not tell me they were free to go on these nights.

It was more difficult to ask personal questions in a crowded night-club with loud (but good) dancing music, than while I was working in the taxi and the passengers were happy to talk in privacy. Furthermore, most women in the night-club appeared to be accompanied by someone (perhaps as expected), often in groups. Of course, I did not wish to embarrass the companions of the women (and myself).

Much to my surprise, I had a number of ladies signify that they liked dancing with me on the dance floor. It certainly appeared to be easier to get to meet women by dancing, rather than hovering about near a table! However, while it appeared that attraction to me may have been a factor, it was not certain because the women might just have enjoyed dancing. Here, perhaps some readers might think I am naïve! Sorry dear readers, the author was too timid to ask important questions of relevance to this section.

I could not be absolutely sure that the women actually liked me (not just liked to dance) and were prepared to answer very personal questions, even if they could have been asked in private (away from the night-club). The mystery has to remain.

After this experience, I can imagine how it must be for many straight guys who want to get to know ladies at places of entertainment and feel thwarted in their efforts.

From having spoken to guys about the issues in question, I thought that the present time might be different to that of many years ago when I was much younger. However, it is possible that not much has changed concerning interactions between young straight ladies and guys. If anything, it is possible that activities which used to be private are conducted much more openly at present. In the opinion of other young straight women I spoke to, ladies who make themselves available to many guys are not the ones whom guys would wish to bring home to their own mothers (as girlfriends). This is a conservative position which also existed when I was much younger.

None-the-less, a young straight man (previously mentioned in a discussion of intimacy and sex in the chapter cited earlier) who gave me permission to include his comments in my book, had said that ladies were not expected to ask a guy for his phone number. This has not changed since the time I was much younger. However, he said that being approached and asked his phone number by a lady on one occasion was good for his ego, rather than upsetting him. At night-clubs, this young straight man had no trouble finding women who were prepared to have sex but not necessarily allow it to progress to intimacy. In my opinion, a young man could not have a bad opinion of a young woman who approached him to ask for a phone number, if it was obvious that she only had honourable intentions. In other words, if the young women wished to get to know a man better with a view to intimacy and a possible relationship, this would be a pure motive. Of course, this is still assuming that a double standard exists for male and female behaviour, where it is fine for guys to want casual sex but not ladies. I think that there should be equality for women and men but the outcome should be constructive, at least according to the values of individuals. When asking someone for his or her phone number, the person might also ask for one in return. In the section on dating in a previous chapter, I wrote that it was best to give only a mobile number to a stranger and only then when there is sufficient trust. It can always be risky.

In writing about the opinions of young ladies and guys, I suspect that many women might not be aware of what guys think and that what ladies think may also be a mystery to many guys. Young straight women were happy to speak to me about these issues, so I suppose that they would be willing to give their opinions to guys, if the guys were to ask for them. Then again, I understand that I am probably only seeing a small fragment of the big picture and being a 46-year-old gay man, I am probably less aware of contemporary reality than many young straight people.



Chapter 5 : Masculinity and what it means to be a man

In general, I consider myself a fairly average man in terms of features one might term masculine. My voice is not naturally loud or deep and I am not tall or extremely muscular. Perhaps athletic might be a kind term for my body-type. Hence, a male who does not have a very muscular body type but works out at a gym like me and who is lean and toned might like to call his body-type athletic. My chest is not hairy. My emotional disposition is sensitive. Now, many stereotypes of a typical man should be visible from this brief assessment of my lack of great masculinity.

One can ask the question as to whether masculinity is really important for a male or not. It is possible that some males may have very strong opinions on this topic. Probably I could have avoided discussing this in my book, if it were not for the emphasis which many men appear to place on masculinity. If one grows up male and lives as a man, one cannot help being exposed to attitudes about masculinity which appear to be common in society. Being aware of such attitudes, I suspect that they can cause difficulty for some males faced with the prospect of coming out as a gay or bisexual man, let alone a transgender person. Masculinity from the perspective of a transgender man will be described in the following section. Perhaps masculinity can also cause problems for parents with gay children or even friends of gay people, who could potentially be unsure of the best way to respond if their mates come out to them.

To my suggestion that many others (straight and gay) might want to know how to fit in, a young transgender man who had been female before becoming male quite rightly told me, “Why? We don’t know.” None-the-less, in my book I have a theme that people should feel free to express their unique sexual preferences. As sexuality seems to be so closely associated with concepts of masculinity and femininity, especially within the context of straight friendships and relationships, I thought that this should be addressed. Hopefully, this can help to avoid much unhappiness and even violence towards others. Gay ladies (lesbians) told me that society now accepted lesbians and that there was no need for gay female adult role models. However, whether or not there are potential problems with masculinity appears to be an open question, so it is being addressed in this chapter.

What it means to be a man according to a transgender person who has experienced being both female and male

Before speaking to others just prior to writing this chapter, I thought it would help readers to understand what a man is and how the ideal man might be expected to act. Little did I realise how incredibly difficult this is to do. Of course, all comments written in this chapter were by permission of the people who made them. In my efforts to clarify my thinking on this subject, I spoke to two transgender men, one of whom had physically been female before he became male. The gender of a person is distinct from his or her sex. Gender is male or female in a social context, rather than a set of biological features, including male or female sex organs.¹⁸ In contrast, sex is male or female in a biological sense. This allows for the possibility that the sex of a person can be male, female, or both if the person has male and female features. This actually does occur even if not common, due to genetics or other reasons.

Up to around the eighth week of development in the uterus (womb), a human embryo is not committed to being physically male or female.⁶ If the male hormone testosterone is released within the embryo in the eighth week due to normal genetic programming, male development takes place. Alternatively, if testosterone is not released, female development occurs. Therefore, something has to happen to make a human become male, otherwise female development naturally occurs.

As has previously been mentioned in the context of discrimination in the chapter on career choices, if the external genitals of a person do not match the features of male or female sex internally, this person is “intersex” (rather than of male or female sex). In contrast, if a person is of male or female sex but identifies with a different gender, this person is transgender. Hence a person can be of male sex but consider herself to be female, or of female sex but consider himself to be male. Please note my use of English, as I shall address the issue of gender in society more generally at the end of this chapter.

The female-to-male transgender man I mentioned at the beginning of this section thought that I would have great difficulty in writing about the essential nature of being a man. His opinion of the answer to what it means to be a man was a combination of and not limited to any of his qualities. The difficulty of defining this exactly makes it hard to answer the question in the way I asked it. He seemed a little amused that I wanted to answer it in a short time. He said that he wanted to discover the answer himself and that it was his life’s work and even though he is in his mid 20s, he is still figuring it out. When I suggested personal qualities which appear to be regarded as manly (leadership, responsibility, courage), even though women can have them too, he seemed to agree that they represented an ideal man. However, these qualities do not define a man and he rightly said that in society there is no clear set of rules about how to be a man.

The difference between sexual preference and gender identity: A discussion on being transgender

Having been both female and male at different times, the transgender man I wrote about in the last section said that he has been on both sides of the gender spectrum. In a similar way to sexual preference from straight to gay, according to the Kinsey Scale I mentioned previously in this book, gender identity can form a spectrum. Indeed, one young gay man with obvious feminine characteristics informed me that he is “bigender”, meaning that he has male and female gender identity. The only accurate comment the transgender man I mentioned could make about male gender was that it is different from female gender. Indeed, it is probably difficult to be more specific because of individual variation. The transgender man likes being male and expressing his gender identity as male. He said that he likes to be physically strong and working out, protecting female friends at night-clubs, not being emotionally driven and talking to mates without listening to hours of drama. Of course, this can imply that women like a great deal of small talk (about trivial things) or that they might see men as uncommunicative! The transgender man also said that he liked growing a small moustache. With the exception of this, the things he mentioned could also be liked by certain people identifying as female.

Gender identity may be of little concern to many people because they might take it for granted, as it may often cause very little conflict in society. However, the transgender man thought that gender identity (in his case the desire to be a man) is a primal urge, like sex or hunger.



When I asked how he knew that he was male inside (in terms of identity), he said I should imagine a situation in which one had an accident resulting in a badly damaged body. Doctors could not decide on the gender, as there was no penis, so they created a vagina (making the sex female). After waking up everyone said that one is a girl. One had no memory of the time before the accident but something inside just felt wrong. The transgender man knew it did not reflect himself when people told him he was pretty, said “hello miss” or bought him make-up. He said that he has always been male since he was born but his body was wrong, so he had it matched up with his brain later. Indeed he said that the only reason transgender people change their bodies (although many do not), is so that society sees them as they see themselves.

The transgender man felt very strongly about this and said that he would have killed himself if he had not changed his body. However, he is happy now as a man. He said that other transgender people have similar experiences due to a similar environment. Of course, I wished to confirm this. Therefore I asked another transgender man (also in his mid 20s), who had not changed his body. He agreed that transgender people have similar experiences due to a similar environment. He also agreed on the reason transgender people change their bodies.

A distinction must be made between gender identity and sexual preference (as gay or straight). A person can identify as a man or woman but can be attracted to either sex (or both). The transgender man I spoke to originally said that he was bisexual, in that he is sexually attracted to men, whereas he is emotionally attracted to women. The second transgender man said that he is only attracted to men (not women). His own preference is clear. Of course, people can have confusion with gender identity in the way they can with sexual preference. This is where supportive friends and members of the public can help people cope.

Inner versus outer aspects of being a man

Aspects of masculinity which can be important to the concept of being a man are personal qualities of a general nature, a masculine versus a feminine personality and physical attributes (such as male sex organs). In order to narrow down possibilities for identity to properties which are acceptable to those other than me, I asked people to comment. Perhaps not surprisingly, inner qualities were more important to the essential concept of being a man than possession of male anatomy. For example, one young Asian gay man said a “warrior soul” was needed. He said that outward appearance did not matter, rather what is on the inside. None-the-less, comments received by others to suggestions I made of features of masculinity were interesting. Being naturally “straight-acting” and not feminine in my mannerisms, I wished to ask feminine gay men about essential characteristics of being a man, so that their perspectives could complement mine for a better explanation. Before asking others for their views, I had thought that an ideal man was such as described in the famous and widely available poem *If* by Rudyard Kipling, an English writer who wrote the poem over 100 years ago.¹⁹ This poem illustrates a number of virtues not restricted to males; namely, calmness, patience, honesty, objectivity, integrity, courage, toughness, endurance, responsibility, humility, maturity, self-reliance, leadership, teamwork and diligence. The feminine men did not think that the poem represented being male, rather simply good human inner qualities. They considered that the poem reflected stereotyped views of society (perhaps more firmly entrenched over 100 years ago) and ignored woman, who could also have these virtues.

Of course, the nature of a woman is not addressed by the poem. I thought one must accept the condition that being a woman was something to be proud of. The issue could then rather be of different roles, rather than of male versus female nature. Hence, a man should protect and a woman should nurture. This assumes that the man is strong and in a position of power or advantage. One young gay man I spoke to was fairly masculine and “straight-acting”. He thought that the desire to protect might be a primal instinct, like “fight or flight” when threatened.

He added that when his baby sister was born, he and his brothers became protective of her. When I asked one young feminine gay man if a role of a male is to protect, he disagreed. He said that there are many women who identify as women who are strong and independent and go to work, while there are many men who are fathers and stay at home. This would not make someone any less of a man.

Maybe one could think of a man and a woman in terms of a balance of qualities traditionally thought of as masculine and feminine, rather like Yin and Yang (according to ancient Chinese philosophy). According to one young feminine gay man, this creates the problem of labelling genders and expecting corresponding attitudes from them. Another young feminine gay man acknowledged that being gay frees one from many gender roles, as heterosexual social norms are keeping these roles in place. A third young gay man addressed my concept specifically. He spoke about masculinity and femininity like two forces, Yin and Yang; masculinity being about strength and confidence (like being the hunter) and femininity being about vulnerability and nurturing (being the gatherer). However, he said that there is no ideal, in that there is nothing good or bad about being either masculine or feminine.

Hence, virtues can merely be seen as properties of either a male or female. He said that strength is something that can reside in the most effeminate of humans, especially ones who have been subjected to a great deal of hatred and shunning in their lives. After speaking to a number of young gay men, it became clear that men and women should not be compared in terms of any stereotyped gender roles, inner qualities which could be shared by the whole of humanity, or by applying some sort of formula. Culturally, one can view a male and female as distinct but the comparison is very subtle if one removes all thought of cultural programming. Speaking to the young feminine gay men helped me to see that the essential nature of being a man is very elusive and difficult to determine.

Gay men discuss whether or not a man should act masculine

It is not difficult for me to be masculine and “straight-acting”. No effort is required by me to do so. However, during my discussions with others I realised that it was not natural and necessarily easy for all gay men to be like this. If one can accept that some determination may be necessary for some men to be masculine in terms of mannerisms and behaviour, then one can ask whether or not a man should try. Rather than discuss masculine behaviour dogmatically from my own point of view here, I first asked young gay men for their opinions. In doing this, I acknowledge that there may be a difference due to the passage of time and a corresponding change in social norms (considerations of acceptable behaviour) and/or culture.

Before considering appropriate versus inappropriate masculine behaviour (as if there should be a judge), one must consider incentive.



If there is a motivating factor for masculine behaviour, other than simply that one should behave like a man (even though this is elusive), then men would want to try to be masculine. Gay men can be attracted to men who are manly, effeminate or both. It is difficult to generalise in matters of taste, just as it is difficult to do with preferences for food by people. However, most of the young gay men I asked or who told me about it preferred manly men, regardless of whether or not they were more feminine or masculine in their mannerisms and behaviour.

When I asked one feminine gay man if he thought most gay men prefer manly guys, he tended to agree. In his opinion manly meant acting according to pre-established standards in society, such as having a deep voice and few mannerisms. However, he thought it depended largely on what one considered manly and in which context (such as location). One young Asian gay man who considered himself manly had a stronger opinion. He was quite confident that most gay men preferred manly guys. Examples he gave of what is considered manly were a loud voice, strength and being brave. He said the stronger and braver one is, the more likely one is to find someone for a relationship. Therefore, to be happy this man thought one should be manly. Although I am gay, there are aspects of feminine and masculine men I like, although I am rarely attracted to women. To me, personality, appearance and ease of communication (establishing a rapport) matter more than masculine or feminine behaviour to determine attractiveness. However, I agree with others that there is a bias among gay men towards attraction to manly guys.

Attracting other men can be considered motivating for a gay man, so one might think that gay men would try to be manly. However, when asking if acting manly was something gay men should do, most young gay men thought this had to be entirely a personal choice. In contrast, the young Asian gay man whom I just mentioned (who considered himself manly), thought that gay a man should learn how to speak louder, act stronger and have other characteristics considered manly. He said that it is acceptable for gay men to act in a feminine manner but not too much so.

He thought that people should be willing to change their behaviour. He thought that people do not like to speak to others, if they give the impression of being gay and effeminate and that a lover probably would not like it. Given the condition that people (gay or straight) and that a lover did not care, I asked him if being manly would matter then. He still thought that a gay man should be manly. He thought that most gay men preferred manly guys and it was important to please one's partner in a relationship. In general, he thought that a man can be caring, domesticated and patient as long as he acts like a man (not "girly").

Being masculine and "straight-acting" I wanted to understand why feminine men displayed many feminine mannerisms and behaved in a feminine way. One young feminine gay man said that many gay guys act in a feminine manner because it is natural for them, even if they are in the company of other gay men who might prefer manly guys. They do not exaggerate it or put on a show. He said that choices he makes, such as the length of his hair and style of his clothing, reflect how he is on the inside (hence self-expression). It may only appear strange if one views it from a perspective of traditional heterosexual norms. A young feminine gay man is no more putting-on any mannerisms than a man who is naturally masculine in behaviour. The same can also be said for choosing typically masculine or feminine hobbies or activities. It is just due to natural preferences. Indeed, I must add that feminine gay people have as much right to be themselves and not hide behaviour that is natural for them, as much as do straight people acting in a manner they consider socially acceptable. Although there were subtle differences in how feminine gay men explained the reasons for their feminine behaviour, universally they felt comfortable with it and were just expressing themselves.

The ideal of being a man and thinking about this concept to avoid potential confusion

The concept of an ideal for a man, as for a woman, is difficult (if not impossible) to define. A number of young gay men I spoke to preferred to think in terms of human values, rather than anything specific to sex or gender. One young gay man (identifying himself as quite masculine and “straight-acting”) said that males and females are raised to look and act differently. He agrees about the influence of social norms but said they can and have changed. The young man said that one must do the greatest one can towards one’s fellow human for the betterment of humanity. He said that is why humans have ethics. Another young gay man (who was feminine) said that anyone who has values and qualities that do not harm others and perhaps who also is good to others is a good human, irrespective of sex and gender. Here I can write that perhaps a more important question is how to be a good person, rather than how to conform to an unattainable ideal.

This could still leave a problem to any people who felt the need for clarity in terms of identifying with their preferred gender. Of course, I cannot know how many such people there are, as the female-to-male transgender man I chatted with at the start of this chapter had rightly indicated. He also said “everything is gendered”. He meant that the need to be masculine or feminine was a large part of everything. He said that one forgets names and faces but not gender. One only has to think of language structures to see his point. For example, in French nouns are always either masculine (“le”) or feminine (“la”). None-the-less, I shall write the essence of the thoughts of myself and most others with whom I have discussed the nature of being a man.

One idea I discussed with other young gay men is that the best definition of being a man was simply biological, in a very general way.

Therefore, a man would have male genetics, with an X and a Y chromosome, male anatomical features and secondary sex characteristics. These are the uniquely male characteristics which normally arise only at puberty when sexual maturation occurs, especially hair development (under the armpits and on the pubic region, face and potentially other areas of the body), deeper voice, muscular development and a change in body proportions (narrow hips and broad shoulders). Of course, females also have unique secondary sex characteristics appearing at puberty. Biological maturation proceeds beyond sexual maturation, such as further growth of the body and changes in development of long bones and teeth.⁶ Furthermore, mental and emotional maturation occur at variable rates and assessing this can perhaps be considered subjective.

It is important to state that I do not imply that boys having reached puberty can be called men. It is also important to state that I am not implying that people who are legally adult should have sex with children who have reached puberty because if this were done in the full knowledge that they are children it would be deliberate exploitation (“using them”). A guiding principle needs to be protection from harm and/or exploitation. Protection also means not exploiting young people under the guise that they have no legal right to complain (not adults yet). A hypothetical example might be a young person, not yet legally an adult, working for a team of adults.



He or she could be defrauded of profit from work done. This might be under the guise of a need to take care of money earned by the young person until he or she is mature enough to make decisions. None-the-less, it is fair to state that there is no definite date at which a given boy will become a man biologically and one must defer to the law of the country one is in for the age of adulthood (such as 18 or 21 years of age).

A related issue is peace of mind for a young man when there are no clear and universally accepted “rites of passage” for becoming a man. “Rites of passage” are ceremonies, like an initiation, a graduation ceremony, wedding and funeral. They mark stages of social transition in the lives of people. Anxiety can potentially result in young males if they are not sure at what stage they are men, in the same way as if they are not sure that they have the attributes of a man (the theme of this chapter). Many males may long to drive a car or have sex just to feel like a man. In the past, smoking tobacco cigarettes may have provided this feeling for many males but smoking tobacco is now largely taboo. Possibly an 18th or 21st birthday party is a ceremony to signify becoming a man for many males now. Regardless of what signifies the change from being a boy to becoming a man, such a transition should be acknowledged in the life of a man, preferably in association with well-meaning adults.

Given the general biological definition of a man mentioned earlier, it was necessary to seek opinions as to whether or not this was sufficient. Therefore, with respect to gender, any behaviour which can be attributed to a man should be totally subject to free choice. When I spoke to two young feminine gay men, one agreed very strongly. The other said that it should be up to the individual to define the person’s own gender.

Another young gay man told me that he did not think people should deliberately act masculine or feminine. Rather, they should act as they would naturally and then be labelled. This brings me back to the explanation of the femaletto-male transgender man earlier in this chapter, with regard to what it means to be a man. He thought this was a combination of and not limited to any qualities of a man. Furthermore, he thought that male gender was just different to female gender. It is difficult to be more specific. Strictly speaking, I think this essentially represents my views and those of most others I have spoken to.

In my opinion, society should be inclusive of all individuals, who should avoid harming one another and live in harmony. This means that beyond a very general understanding of what it means to be a man, there is scope for great variation.

Hence, an individual has a right to express his or her own gender identity. For most people, this can be expected to largely reflect their male or female sex, however individual variations should be totally accepted. Just as a number of taxi passengers with whom I discussed issues related to young gay people thought there should be more discussions like these, topics related to masculinity could benefit from discussion among friendly people. Then all guys might feel more comfortable with their gender identity.

Long-term pair bonding of animals in nature means that the young offspring are cared for until they can look after themselves and not become prey to another animal. A truly inclusive society would allow people to fulfil their natural potential, without confusion or conflict due to pressure to conform to an unattainable ideal, whether it is being a real man or something else.

In discussion, it is obvious to me that people need to find their individuality and own way of constructive selfexpression. Care of young people can come from parents and society in general. No doubt, what I am proposing (due to my discussions with others) is highly controversial and could easily be misinterpreted. However, I am sure that wellmeaning people can see the potential of this vision to lead to a world full of well adjusted and happy men and women.



Chapter 6 : Parents, relatives and friends

The response of my own parents to me being gay

My parents were good to me during the time I was growing up. Indeed, I am lucky to have had two loving parents who always cared so much about me. Before explaining how my parents responded to me being gay I asked my mother, who gave me permission to write it in this book. Unfortunately, my dear father died less than one year ago, so I could not also seek his permission. He was a good and kind man with noble motives, so I doubt he would have objected, given that telling the story could help others. My father died before I started writing this book, so unfortunately I could not tell him about it. None-the-less, my early experience of coming out to my parents was in the context of a loving family.

As written previously in this book, I came out to my parents at 14 years of age. Following this I was taken to see a psychiatrist, with whom I had consultations over several years. One concern of my parents was that I would be ill-treated by vicious homophobic people (but in 32 years the world has changed to be less homophobic in most countries). However, I did not come out properly until after trying to kill myself at the age of 21 years. My suicide attempt and thoughts and feelings at the time will be described in the chapter on mental health (section entitled “stress related to difficulty coping with being gay, mental health problems and suicide”). My parents were obviously concerned for my welfare and consultations with a psychiatrist were intended to help.

However, my parents changed their view on why people are gay by reading a book after I told them that I was gay. Previously, my parents held the view, at least concerning young gay males, that they were seduced into homosexuality by attractive older men. In other words, being gay was a matter of choice and if there was no contact with gay men, then a young male would not become gay. This view assumes that parents can protect their children from homosexuality. However, my father saw a book called *Brain Sex*²⁰ on television and said to my mother that they had to get it. Both my parents read it and changed their opinions. *Brain Sex* featured work by the East German researcher Dr. Gunter Doerner. This was in the time before the fall of the Berlin wall and end of communism in part of Germany. It concerned the effects of hormones on a developing embryo in the uterus (womb) during pregnancy, whereby hormones could affect the brain and cause homosexuality. This concept will be discussed in the chapter of this book presenting evidence against being gay by choice. The research findings convinced my parents that being gay was not a matter of choice.

My parents remained supportive during the rest of my teenage years and adulthood. When I started a relationship with a man from Taiwan, they were open-minded and did not oppose my decision to live and work there for several years to see more of him. They remained supportive of me during the time of the relationship (9 ½ years) and were comforting when it ended. My parents shared my joys and sorrows throughout this time and were supportive of my efforts to express myself as a gay man. A gay son could not wish for more. However, I am sure that there would be many parents like this in the world.

My social life after coming out

Coming out as gay (properly) led to a sense of relief for me. My social life was very full. Having graduated from university and having found an interesting job with reasonable hours, I was able to go out often and meet other gay people.

Within a short space of time, I had a number of friends. It was exciting to visit many gay places of entertainment and read books on gay themes. During this time, one year before I started my PhD, I had a great deal of free time. In my opinion, this was necessary to make up for many years in which I had trouble coming to terms with my sexuality. Even to this day, I am on friendly terms with gay people I met at this time of my life.

During the time of my PhD research, there were far fewer opportunities to go out. However, I tried to socialise with other gay people whenever possible. Unfortunately, with the passage of time, I lost contact with some friends. In my opinion, this is a sacrifice which comes from starting or having a busy career. At the place where I did my PhD, I had a very good friend who was straight. We had similar patterns of lab work, which allowed us to eat meals together and go out together when work permitted. When I came out to him, he completely accepted me.

During the time that I was in a relationship (shortly after finishing my PhD), my partner's friends became my friends too. His family accepted me completely. They were wonderful people but unfortunately, after my separation from my partner, I lost contact with them all. Perhaps this is due to the awkwardness of the separation between my partner and me and their continued association with my partner.

After the break-up of my relationship, I continued to make friends. Although I have gay friends, most of my friends are straight. Indeed, I have a very good straight friend since the time I was only 14 or 15 years old whom I met at high school. We became friends because of a common interest in computers and technology. There have never been any conflicts in our friendship over the years and he accepts me totally as a gay man. Friends are often made through sharing common interests or being in the same locations at the same times. Hence, I made many straight friends through activities which did not involve gay themes or the gay community.

If I make a new friend now, I let him or her know that I am gay as soon as possible. In my experience, this reduces the potential for awkwardness later, especially if they are to find out from another source (not oneself). I cannot recall ever having lost a friend due over the discovery that I am gay. However, the passage of time and reluctant neglect led to the loss of many friendships. In my experience, when one has only infrequent contact with friends, it becomes more difficult to share aspects of one's life. For example, how can one say that one has time for a particular activity but not enough time to phone or write a letter (perhaps nowadays, sending an email). None-the-less, sharing one's life with good friends brings great joy. In my case, this continued after coming out as a gay man, when a new dimension of my life had opened.



Discussions with other gay men on coming out to their parents and friends

Having just explained my own experiences of the responses of my parents and friends to knowledge of me being gay, I shall write about the experiences of others. The young gay men who responded to my questions all gave me permission to write about their experiences in my book. In general, young gay men had good experiences of revealing the fact that they were gay to their friends and parents. Perhaps, this may partly be due to the present time, where there is less discrimination, generally. However, in my experience people with friendly intentions continue to care even if they learn confronting or even disturbing news (such as my own suicide attempt). In general, it appeared to be easier for young gay men to come out to their friends than to their parents, although I did not speak to many people about this and there is likely to be a great deal of variation in personal experiences.

A couple of young gay men told me that their friends already knew. Although they had not come out to their friends at high school, they decided to change their lifestyle afterwards, being open about being gay. One young gay man said that his best friend from primary school was happy for him and supported him totally. He also said this friend came out to him as gay later! The young gay man said that he was not good at hiding his nature and did not fit the “boy mould”. He had his own fit and an overdose of attitude. He even said that he had a guy “crush on him” because of his confidence against the bullies. Although I think friends and colleagues often suspect if one is gay, one young gay man told me that his friends were surprised and had not suspected. However, they accepted him and he did not lose any friends. He had male and female friends and thought he did not lose friends because he proved that he was not weak (hence, “normal” like other boys in class). Interestingly, his friends do not ask him personal questions but just show him respect (not intrusive). Neither do they try to find him a boyfriend, although he said that the girls are curious about the guys he likes!

Experiences with friends and colleagues are not always positive. In the chapter concerning mental health (section called “stress related to difficulty coping with being gay, mental health problems and suicide”), I mention a young gay man in his early 20s who had experienced social exclusion at high school after coming out at 15 years of age. This young man had lost all his friends. However, I believe that the passage of time (less than 10 years), has resulted in much greater acceptance of gay people in general. Therefore, such bad experiences are less likely in many places around the world. One young gay man less than 20 years old told me that he came out to his friends at school at 13 years of age. He said that most of his friends accepted it and he never had an issue with homophobia from his real friends (true to my own experiences going back further in time). However, he said that some of his more masculine school colleagues would pick on him. He could hear “faggot” (a term of insult) said to him by young people he did not know well, several times per day in the school corridors.

Another young gay man in his mid-20s was not out to family or friends. He is Asian and said that he is from a Muslim family who are all really strict. When I asked him whether or not he would come out if he had a boyfriend (he was single), he said that it would not ever happen. In contrast, one young gay man less than 20 years old told me that after coming out his parents said that they would love him no matter what. Another young gay man in his early 20s said that his uncle was gay and he was sure that his parents would not care.

However, he did not want to tell them he was gay. He might have been willing to introduce a boyfriend to his parents (he was single) but was very uncertain about this. The reason he gave me was that it was awkward to bring it up with his parents. He said that it was not their business and did not think they suspected that he was gay.

Another young gay man less than 20 years old (feminine in nature) had mixed responses from his parents. He said that his mother thought that homosexuality was a choice and that he could be straight if he tried to be (although there is much research evidence against this). However, his mother accepted him and did not think there was anything bad about being gay, even if she thought he had a choice. In contrast, his father was hostile. The young man said that he was regularly bashed by his father for many things and repeatedly denied his wish to have a Barbie doll as a gift when he was a small boy. Around this time he was forced to have football lessons. He was beaten by his father for running away from the ball and dancing around the football grounds. At 15 years of age his father beat him for not dealing with his problems like a man, when he was given antidepressants for severe depression and anxiety. However, as mentioned earlier, his mother was supportive of him.

From all these responses, it is clear that there is some risk in coming out to friends and parents. However, the majority of responses were positive. In my experience, coming out is unavoidable if a gay person wishes to be truly happy. However, one should not fear losing friends or relatives. They may already suspect that one is gay and could well be supportive.

The next section is devoted to the issue of coming out to parents.

Views of young gay men on how parents can help their gay children

It is my firm opinion that most parents love their children, although I do not have children, so perhaps am not the most appropriate person to comment. Perhaps this is partly due to belief in the essential goodness of human nature. A young straight man who had dated over 50 women (previously mentioned in the chapter entitled “coming out, intimacy, relationships and marriage”), who had parents who separated, said that they were good to their children even though they hated each other. I am sure many parents similarly wish to act in the best interests of their children. Therefore, I think that when homophobia is experienced from a parent, it is due to a problem which the parent has or a conflict with his or her own values and beliefs. The purpose of writing about it in this section is to reduce such cases.

Nowadays that education about gay people is more widespread than before, I think that homophobia should be less. More people have had a chance to see that gay people are ordinary and not monstrous! If parents are hostile to their gay children, I can imagine several possibilities. One is that they think that the children are choosing to be gay, although growing evidence clearly indicates that there is no choice. This may mean that a parent may think a child is being wicked or disobedient because his or her child is gay. Another possibility could be fear that other people will find out and treat the child or whole family badly. However, nowadays in most places there is much less discrimination than before. There may also be a conflict with religious or other beliefs, or an assumption that their child will be promiscuous because he or she is gay or present some other conflict with the values of one or both parents. It is also possible that advice was sought from an ill-informed family friend, medical doctor or other professional.



Trusting bad advice can lead to sorrowful problems later. It is always best to seek a second or third opinion and so on, depending on how serious the issue or consequences. At any rate, if the issue is a conflict with beliefs or values, I think that a parent must choose between the cherished beliefs or values and their child. Otherwise children may grow apart from their parents. Indeed, one young gay man told me that he has been living away from his family since being at university. Thus by living away from them, they would not know about what he is doing. In his case, there was a potential conflict with religious parents and he did not wish to come out as gay to them.

Therefore, loving parents who are religious, have strict ethnic traditions, are conservative or have other reasons for assuming that their child might not wish to come out as gay (should this occur naturally), might wish to know how to create an atmosphere so that their child would come out. In order to answer this question outside my own bias of age (being 46 years old) and circumstances, I asked young gay men what parents can do to make it easier for their child to come out as gay.

One young gay man less than 20 years old said to make their children feel loved no matter what. Another young gay man in his early 20s said to start early (when children were small). He said never to say bad things like “don’t be a fag” and not to assume that treating gay people badly is popular with youth. Hence, it could be assumed that a parent might not be homophobic but just utter homophobic statements for some particular reason, even to be popular with the children! This young gay man said that parents should have an open and honest relationship with their children which permits open communication.

One young Asian gay man in his early 20s said (jokingly, I presume) that his parents would kill him if they found out because they dislike gay people. Given that he knew about this book I am writing, I asked him would they change if they realised that there was no choice to be gay. He said no. I said that I thought most parents loved their children but do not know if being gay is by choice or not (thus if the children have an excuse). Then I asked him if he would come out to his parents if he had a chance. The young Asian gay man said that’s all he wishes for. He agreed that parents should let their children know that they do not mind if their children are gay or straight.

He added that they will “give their children a chance to release them”. There is a great sense of relief in coming out, so I understand his meaning clearly.

When I talked to a young gay man in his early 20s about guys who might be scared to come out in general (assuming to family and friends) he said, “So to the guys who are scared to come out, you are you. If you are being honest to yourself, then you just own it because in the end, all you have is you. Come out and they will learn and take no prisoners!” This young man was out to his parents.

Therefore, to make it easier for children to come out to their parents in my opinion and those of young gay men, the following suggestions can be helpful. Please do not be offended about me writing this because I do not have children. Firstly, provide an atmosphere of unconditional love, so children may feel loved no matter how unlovable they might potentially feel. Do not say bad things about gay people. Parents should make it clear that they would not mind if their children were gay or straight. Here, I should comment that a couple of young gay men said not to ask a child if he or she is gay. One young gay man was asked by his father and found this very scary. However, I believe that many young people would be happy to come out to their parents if the atmosphere was suitable for this when the children are naturally ready.

Finally, be sure that beliefs and values are constructive and even if they are not, that these beliefs and values are not being placed between parents and their children. Hopefully, these points can reduce much sorrow and allow families to be as happy as the one in which I have grown up.

Real versus fake friends

Unfortunately life is not like in the movies, where the baddies and goodies wear different hats or are somehow easy to tell apart. Therefore, I wish to make a few comments about friends. During the process of writing this book, I thought how vulnerable people may be if they cannot tell their true from any false friends. One may need to try to get along with a spouse, family or work colleagues but one should be able to choose to be surrounded by good friends only.

In writing this section, I do not advocate testing friends to see how much they will tolerate. Not only would this be irritating to friends but also it might still not help to discover which friends are real and which are not. Perhaps only the passing of time and gaining of experience (with potential sadness along the way) is the best way to learn how to tell whether or not a friend is true. However, one does not need to find out in an unpleasant way. That is why I am writing this section.

In general, when one is in a situation of crisis the people that remain supportive are true friends. Even if one has not regarded them as friends before, this will be their nature. In my experience, the people to whom one has often been good, spent much time with and trusted often turn their back during an emergency. Of course, they may have good reasons for doing so and this must be taken into account. For example, if someone is poor one cannot expect them to pay money to help. Strangely enough, people who provide assistance when times are very bad are generally those whom one might least expect to do so. Such a person could be a total stranger or even someone whom one might have regarded as an enemy. Nevertheless, a person like this is a true friend.

A fake friend is one who is unpleasant simply because it suits him or her to be so. For example, if one comes out as gay to friends, sometimes there may be a bad response. If there is no reason for this, then the person is not a good friend.

Even if such a person has religious beliefs in conflict with homosexuality, then the friend should say so and not just turn his or her back and be unfriendly. The reason I now come out to friends very earlier in my friendships, is so that I can surround myself with true friends. This decreases the chances of awkwardness later, as I mentioned earlier in this chapter. In this case it is easier to tell good friends apart from false ones, as one is not placing demands on the friendship. There is nothing such a friend has to give and nothing he or she needs to do to help. The person only has to be present as a friend, for the warmth of companionship. If a friendship does not permit this, then a person is not a true friend. In my opinion, no matter how many years have passed, one is better off without such a person to call a friend. In fact, if one is unlucky such a person may turn out to be deceitful without one's knowledge.

My father used to say that the first kick is the best one, although I do not know the source of such a saying. In my opinion, people will keep bad friends due to loyalty or because they think that there is no cost. Unfortunately, experience often shows the cost later. When fake friends are kept, a cost can always be lost happiness.



Perhaps one can also treat beliefs and values as one treats a friend. If a given belief or value is good, then it is worth keeping. For example, one may wish to believe in God or be religious for some reason. However, God should at least be a friend. One does not need to worry about whether or not God is loving or has other attributes. If one believes in God, then God (note how I am trying to avoid using gender here, as “He” or “She”) must be a friend, so that one can feel the warmth of God’s companionship. No doubt, for a person to whom celibacy comes naturally, God can be like a companion. I think that it might have been like this for certain saints. In relationships too, it can feel unpleasant to be used and I imagine that a situation of mutual use (such as money in exchange for sex) is not as nice as one in which there is a bond of friendship. Hopefully, there is also love, affection, attraction and good sex. One may not be in the mood but one’s partner is at some points in time. During one of the first occasions I went to a gay night-club (at 18 or 19), a young man and I discussed this very situation. In regard to two people with mutual attraction and in a relationship, he posed the question as to how difficult would it be to have sex even when one does not really want it? The young man and I got on very well, although we were very different and did not become friends, even though we were on friendly terms when we met at the night-club. Friendship is a precious part of life. It is often rare to meet people who become good friends. It can happen just by chance. On the journey of life I hope that readers will mostly have good friends and encounter few fake ones!

Chapter 7 : Social interactions, bullying and abuse

- Facebook and other social media services

Throughout the course of life one interacts with people; living with a family or other supportive individuals, making friends and interacting to learn skills and obtain a source of income. Social interactions can be pleasant or neutral but also unpleasant. Bullying and abuse are unpleasant. They can be physical (hurting or harming the body) or verbal, with rudeness and insults, but can also include social approaches. These can easily undermine confidence but are not obvious, including gossip (at work or elsewhere) and social exclusion. Young gay people can be targets for bullying and abuse but it also affects other people, potentially even the bullies and society in the long term. In this chapter, I discuss various forms of social interactions which can benefit from discussion, firstly considering bullying and abuse because it can have very bad consequences and is unnecessary. Then I shall address implications of social media services, such as Facebook, which young people worldwide have embraced for their own lifestyle choices. Social media has important implications for employment (good and bad) and provides a new means of bullying (known as “cyberbullying”). Technology can amplify the power of people to do both good and harm during social interactions, which in my opinion must be harnessed by young gay people and others in this global village to break down barriers and ensure fairness and harmony for all in the future.

Physical and verbal bullying

In my own past, I have experienced a great deal of bullying, not only due to being gay. This was physical, verbal (involving insults and/or rude accusations) and of a more indirect social nature. Others with whom I had discussions also had been subject to bullying. Firstly, I shall write about my own experiences and then include those of others. In this section on bullying, I hope to provide potential solutions which readers can accept or reject, depending on their own circumstances in life and opportunities to resolve conflict.

While sharing my own personal experiences of bullying I must confess that I have not usually been good at dealing with bullying. Therefore, there may be better people from whom to seek solutions but I shall do the best I can because it is important to the aims of this book. Firstly, I wish to consider physical bullying. This I experienced mainly from the ages of 6 to 8 years at primary school. Having had parents born overseas, I did not have the local Australian accent of many of my peers. Furthermore, for most of this time I was slightly overweight (until I took up Judo as a sport and grew taller). In addition, I was not good at the most popular sports at the time, which were mainly Australian Rules Football and cricket but included others. Possibly, this was due to below average hand-eye coordination (never diagnosed). Therefore, during my free time I often read books in the library and was considered a nerd by my peers (discussed in previous chapters). Problems with hand-eye coordination can be specifically addressed by health professionals but can also improve with practice. For example, playing sport and/or video games can improve it. In my opinion, doing Tai Chi and Chinese Chi Kung exercises almost daily over the last 16 years has greatly improved my hand-eye coordination and given me faster reflex responses.



In addition, there are sports which require less of it, good for people who have poor hand-eye coordination (as I probably did). Swimming is an example, as opposed to ball sports like different types of football or tennis. Excelling in a team sport is a good way to gain popularity (avoid bullying), keep fit and have fun. Popularity seems to be an enemy of physical bullying but a person can avoid bullying without popularity. Indeed, even just walking with a friend or in a group can help. At this point, consider that I had the attributes of a child who might be bullied.

As soon as I learnt to defend myself physically and could confront the bullies, having the confidence such ability brings, the physical bullying ceased. My parents were concerned about the bullying I had experienced because I told them about it. If one experiences bullying, it is important to tell supportive people about it, such as loving relatives or responsibly-minded and caring staff. With back-up or help, the bullying is easier to stop even without leaving the place where it is occurring. My parents had heard of a club where I could learn Judo (a sport derived from Japanese Jujutsu, also known as Jiu-Jitsu) and I practised diligently until I could defend myself from unprovoked attack (bullying). This took about six months but would vary for people of different ages and circumstances. Learning Judo became more than just a means of self-defence. It gave me regular exercise for good health. I made friends and playing a sport was fun. It could be assumed that people who wish to attack others may also learn Judo, any martial art or form of self-defence. However, it is difficult to become skilled in these activities without much patience and dedication.

People who wish to harm others may be more concerned about quick results than dedication to an art, where slowly developing skills is important. Furthermore, ethical conduct is associated with Judo and martial arts. Various spiritual traditions are involved and purposes to train include maintenance of health, protection of the weak, developing peace of mind and cultivating noble values (such as honour, respect, responsibility, humility and self-discipline). In any case, fighting is not necessary to prevent physical bullying, in my opinion. If one does not present oneself as an easy target, then most bullies are discouraged, I think.

Verbal bullying can be ignored more easily than physical bullying but still hurts and can cause low self-esteem. It is easier to counter it by developing the capacity to give quick-witted replies and confront the bullies. However, rudeness and bad behaviour can often make things worse, especially as this can allow the bully to gain support from others. A young Asian gay man in his early 20s I got to know told me that confronting anti-gay comments with rudeness makes things worse but if people are told nicely (with respect and not shouting), then they are more likely to stop. Physical and verbal bullying can also be signs of more socially organised bullying, which may need to be addressed and is discussed in the next section of this chapter.

Here it is appropriate to write about recent experiences I had of verbal bullying while working as a night-shift taxi driver. Of course, I tried to avoid violent and dangerous passengers because one can be injured, as well as losing any money earned. However, as a taxi driver occasionally one has very rude passengers. Perhaps continuous verbal bullying is a good description of the experience. The forms of rudeness vary but can include insults. For example, I have been called an “ignorant taxi driver” and often similar but less polite expressions have been used! It would not have helped to point out that I have a PhD because then I am arguing with passengers and could be assaulted as a result. Usually, I have endured such treatment without complaint, as I am sure many taxi drivers do. After all, if one is paid after dropping-off passengers at their destinations, it is only a case of tolerating unpleasant behaviour for a short time.

Recently, with exceptionally rude passengers on a couple of occasions I changed my approach. Remaining polite each time, I asked them several times not to continue being rude. After they continued to be rude, I told them that if I accepted them as passengers in spite of their rude behaviour, then they might do this to the next taxi driver they had. Therefore, I asked them to leave the taxi because I would not take them to their destination. There was no need to cheat the passengers, so I did not ask for any money, even though I had just started the taxi meter on one occasion. Of course, there is a risk that they could have become violent because their desire to reach their destination was challenged. However, I thought it was socially responsible not to tolerate very rude behaviour and was willing to lose money (no fare) and take the risk of a personal attack, being inspired by the process of writing this book.

One issue which in my experience adds to the suffering when bullied, especially that involving physical violence, is the “bystander effect”. This term used in psychology refers to a type of behaviour by people who witness someone in need of assistance but do not help. The bystanders (people watching) someone in need are less likely to help if there are more of them. In my experience, this makes someone bullied feel as if the people who do not help support the bully and his or her intention to cause suffering. Unfortunately, I have no expertise in the psychology of bullying. However, I have some experience of being bullied. When it occurs, there is no need to blame the bystanders. Most of them may disapprove of the bullying but do not want to embarrass themselves by becoming involved. It is best to empower oneself to stop the bullying, in my opinion, even if the action of bystanders who care enough to interfere could stop isolated incidents, or maybe even prevent the bullying altogether!

Bullying by spreading gossip and promoting social exclusion

The majority of bullies are cowards, in my opinion. This means that when confronted the bullying should cease, should bullying be physical or verbal. However, this is all too easily said. Cowardly behaviour is displayed in various forms, some of which are more difficult to address. It can be of a social nature. One form of this is malicious gossip, whereby rumours are spread about certain individuals. Although the identity of the gossipers may be known to others, it is probably hidden by the entire group from the person who is the target of such gossip. As I had discussed in the chapter on career choices, this is something which can be addressed by employers should it happen at work (if the employers wish to solve the problem). I have already given some strategies to achieve this. Gossip can be more or less friendly, or distinctly unfriendly. When it is distinctly unfriendly, unless the person can complain about it and management are informed of the problem, staff with responsibility cannot interfere. As I had previously mentioned, without complaints the gossipers or bullies can deny that anything has occurred and avoid confrontation. I had written that this is probably a major reason for the secrecy. Another reason is cowardice. Gossipers can hide behind other people and need not expose themselves to opposition.

The same applies to seeking cooperation from others in gossiping or social exclusion of individuals being bullied. By seeking social support, bullies make up for cowardice by having the backing of others.



On the whole, a major reason I have not been very good at addressing bullying (including malicious gossip) is the attempt to approach it with humility. This is the way indicated by Jesus when he said, “To one who strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also...” (Luke 6:29, Matthew 5:39)²¹ Due to my strong spiritual leanings, this method of coping appealed to me. Although it is very good for cultivating inner peace and spiritual strength, it will not stop gossiping or social bullying. Bullies may hide behind other people and seek to provoke a response. They will continue until they are subdued or the target of the gossip or bullying is made to suffer and loses his or her sense of dignity completely. Even then the bullying is likely to be ongoing. Furthermore, by approaching gossip or social exclusion with humility alone, a person with low self-esteem may be filled with resentment and feel many negative emotions. It is important to know whether you wish to address the bullying or just endure it, as I often have done. For example, a person may feel powerless and may have lost the motivation to try to stop the bullying.

It is still possible to act when the source of bullying or gossip is hidden. One can seek help from someone in a position of authority or power. However, this is risky if such a person does not wish to help or even agrees with or supports the bullies. Seeking help is most effective when a person in whom one confides has something to gain by stopping the bullying or something to lose if it continues, such as a person in the management at work who is responsible for productivity. Of course, this can lead to dismissal if the problem is considered to be too difficult to solve in order to maintain a team spirit, as I had written in the chapter on career choices. One may not even know the nature of the rumour.

However, if it is suspected and thought to be based on lies, then one can tell friends or colleagues the truth (even if it is personal) and allow the truth to circulate independently of lies spread by gossip. When being the target of gossip, social exclusion or other forms of bullying, it helps to enjoy friendships and be kind to oneself. Being treated badly can be emotionally draining. Thus, rather than withdraw one can have a social life and actively do things one enjoys. In my opinion, there is nothing a bully hates more than the target being happy in spite of ill-treatment!

Forms of social bullying are more likely to occur when people have a grievance or there is prejudice against the person targeted, including racism. During the 1990s homophobia was widespread and I was working on an AIDS-related PhD project. I am sure that I was the target of gossip and also experienced social isolation. At no time did I know which person or people were responsible. Indeed, visible signs of a problem were often subtle. For example, the tea ladies often treated me with great disdain but I never discovered the reason. It could even have been my status as a single man, rather than homophobia.

While doing biomedical research work overseas in Taiwan, I experienced similar treatment. However, when I spoke to another foreign worker, he had experienced the same problem. This man was married (presumably straight) but his wife had never made the trip to visit him in Taiwan from his home country, perhaps to save money. Quite possibly, the problem we both experienced was due to being seen as desirable and single men, without the presence of a female to mark her territory, thus making each of us unavailable without doubt. Being eligible and appearing determinedly single, gossip that we were up to no good could easily have spread. Any others who were lonely or unhappy in a relationship might gladly have spread malicious lies without wishing to know if they were true or not because this reflected their sentiments. Another possibility could have been jealousy at being seen to be from a desirable home country and with a good income.

These may be harsh words from me without knowing the full story but a number of experiences I had were distinctly odd. Here is one example. While working in Taiwan I used to eat lunch at a cafeteria near the workplace. The ladies staffing the cafeteria knew that I was a vegetarian but at that time I still ate eggs (now I do not). One day, dried fish powder (popular in Taiwan) covered all the food for purchase, except the duck's eggs. When I wanted to buy the eggs the staff said something to the effect that vegetarians don't eat eggs! Dried fish powder was relatively expensive, so I went farther away to eat lunch for a while. When I had returned to the same cafeteria, the dried fish powder was no longer on most of the food for purchase. Quite possibly, rumours and poor treatment by others were due to some sort of grievance or prejudice, rather than that they were just intrinsically wicked or bad.

A potential solution to social bullying was offered to me by the young gay Asian man in his early 20s mentioned in the previous section, who gave me permission to include his comments in this book. He said that if experiencing hatred from other guys at work due to being gay, then one should relax. He thought that one prejudice against gay men was that of being thought to be "bitchy". The young man said that one must be friends with the ladies at work and not be bitchy. Then slowly the ladies convince the guys that there is nothing wrong with one.

Hence, one must show people that one is a nice person. Of course, if prejudice is extreme this will not be effective because people would not dare to be convinced. However, I think that such times have changed in most countries.

Another young gay man in his early 20s I also got to know gave me permission to pass on his comments. He told me of his experience of social exclusion after coming out as gay at high school at 15 years of age, less than 10 years before. He said that he came out in stages, firstly to himself when aged 10 years and then to his mother when 12 years old before coming out at high school.

He perceived his environment neither to be homophobic (with risk of physical bullying) nor gay-friendly but "gayneutral", as he phrased it. He longed for self-expression and to share his life with others. In addition, he wanted to grow spiritually and tell others in order to challenge himself to have the courage to do so. Opportunities to come out were accepted by him. When someone said, "I heard from a rumour that you were gay," he responded with, "Yes, I am." People seemed friendly when getting him to expose himself as gay. An example of something said to him was, "My friend is gay..." It appeared that his friends and others were not homophobic but yet he was socially excluded after coming out at high school. There was very little bullying or teasing, although he lost almost all his friends over this, who always made excuses not to "hang out", even though he wanted to talk to them about it.

The young gay man had experienced social exclusion up to Year 12 (aged 17) at high school. He had no real friends but a girl was prepared to talk to him. He had a crush on a couple of guys, whom he had told, who consequently avoided him. The girl was compassionate and thought the behaviour was petty and that it was a pity to have a crush on such a guy. To cope with rejection from others, he rejected them, although he was still friendly. If asked how he was, he would reply, "Pretty lonely." We discussed his experiences and both thought that it could have been different if there were accepted social patterns of interaction for young gay people. Examples might be being able to bring a boyfriend to the house of a friend's family or being able to hold hands with another guy in public.



Even without homophobia or the intention of bullying, social exclusion could have resulted from awkwardness after coming out. There may simply have been no socially prescribed way of responding. Therefore, his friends and others had avoided him.

Use of social media to bully: “Cyberbullying”

Social media allows individuals to communicate with each other electronically via the internet, without necessarily identifying themselves. This creates meeting places online, where people can communicate with each other for free, internationally. Unfortunately, this leads to an extension of verbal bullying and social bullying through the use of electronic technology, called “cyberbullying”. Suicide can result due to cyberbullying. Therefore, its capacity to harm should not be underestimated.

Companies which have social media networks (such as Facebook and Twitter) have an incentive to prevent cyberbullying. Facebook and Twitter have webpages to address bullying.^{22,23} They have answers to many potential questions of interest relating to misuse of Facebook or Twitter for bullying. Following is an example of cyberbullying prevention. Facebook enables a user of its network to report pictures of him- or herself which this person does not like. Interestingly, Facebook found that a user was more likely to take action about a photo of him- or herself that the user did not like when he or she had a language to do this. Hence, if a user is prompted by choices with boxes to tick, such as a photo being embarrassing or offensive, action was more likely. In a similar way to the situation of the young gay man mentioned at the end of the last section, interaction in a social setting is more likely where a socially acceptable framework for this exists, in my opinion. Although to a great extent such a framework is still lacking, discrimination against gay people presently appears to be much less than before. This suggests that there is the potential for people to communicate with one another to create new and constructive social norms which integrate gay relatives, friends and acquaintances into their own social circles, rather than to exclude them due to the awkwardness of missing a socially acceptable way to include them. The bystander effect mentioned earlier in this chapter, where people who witness bullying do nothing to help, not only applies to physical and verbal bullying but also cyberbullying. Companies offering social media services are trying to stop cyberbullying. However, people using socially media networks can also act to keep them friendly.

Lack of direct face-to-face communication makes cyberbullying especially easy. Years ago it appeared that a world war could start more easily when people fighting each other were not visible or known to one another. Indeed, the improvement in global communication appears to be able to unite people and make large wars less likely. However, the ease with which people can attack others through social media goes against the unifying process of free and rapid communication worldwide.

The problem of cyberbullying is not necessarily only due to discrimination, such as against gay people in general. Cyberbullying can also become a means of expressing negative emotions against individuals that people might be able to resolve more constructively if talking face-to-face. Hence, if someone is feeling jealous, angry or resentful, he or she may resort to cyberbullying on a large scale because it is easy and apparent consequences or opposition are less. My belief is that if a sufficiently large number of people want social media to remain friendly, then anyone who does not will find a lack of social support for this. A person who is bullied in any form may feel alone but should understand that he or she has support.

Most people wish to maintain a constructive social order, I think. For example, if someone in a group accidentally says something embarrassing or mean to others, the group becomes silent. On night-shifts driving a taxi with a group of passengers, I have often observed this. Another example is driving on the left or right side of the road. Left or right is not superior in itself, although some people could joke that it is! However, people of a nation agree to keep to the left or right, so that everyone can travel safely. If people were to drive on either side at random, the population of a country could not enjoy safe travel, or if so only very slowly! Social media use can be fair, I am sure, because I like to believe that human nature is inherently good.

Abuse within a family

Physical violence against individuals is abuse but it can also have other forms, such as verbal abuse or neglect. Causing any form of cruelty is abuse, even if it is not done on purpose. People who experience abuse can be young or old, such as children or elderly people. Although I have not experienced abuse within my own family, people I have spoken to have been direct targets of it. Although bullying (including rape) is also abuse, here I wish to restrict discussion of abuse to that occurring within a family because previous sections already covered bullying.

The reason to include abuse as a topic in this book is to motivate people who have been abused to find constructive ways of dealing with it. Abuse can potentially make people feel alone but they would find support from others. People who have been abused can be gay or straight. That gay men are inherently abusers of children is a myth but there will be gay men who have themselves experienced abuse from men as children. It need not only be sexual but can be violent. Rather than suffer silently, people can seek help to heal any hurt or damage done.

One man (not gay) kindly spoke to me about his experience of abuse and gave me permission to describe relevant aspects of it in this book. It is hoped that anyone reading this with experience of abuse in the past might be able to identify with this or similar characteristics of it, as abuse can take many forms. Maybe this will be helpful to someone who has been abused. This man had experienced abuse from his father as a child from the ages of 9 or 10 years to his 20s. The abuse was physically violent rather than sexual. His father would hit him after drinking alcohol, apparently blaming his son for his problems. His father thought that his son was a difficult child. It appears that his father drank alcohol because he himself had been abused by his own father, biological and/or adopted, when younger.

The son did not have friends because his face was full of anger and hatred, so other children avoided him. He cried about this. Although he had relatives who could have rescued him from his abusive father, he did not tell any of them about the abuse because he thought it would stop by itself. The abuse is in the past now but he still cannot get over it. It haunts him, especially at night. He needs to talk about it to feel better but does not get the opportunity to discuss it.

In my opinion, someone who has experienced abuse within a family should seek professional help, such as counselling, to cope with it better. The experience of abuse just described illustrates why. It appears that the suffering caused by abuse is difficult for people to overcome alone, hence the suggestion to seek professional help. Of course, friends or relatives could provide help too but it may be less effective without specific knowledge of how to help.



Furthermore, without being sure that a person is telling the truth by proper training, much harm can be done to others by acting on what is said. Of course, it is good to remove a child from actual harm! This is not to say that people who have been abused are liars but there are other problems. For example, certain mental health conditions such as “multiple personality disorder” (also known as dissociative identity disorder) can potentially give the impression of abuse having occurred when there may have been none. Additionally, in attempting to help people who have suffered abuse without professional training, violence can result. For example, a person could be injured while trying to help someone who may have an undiagnosed mental health condition (such as schizophrenia or other form of psychosis), even if violence towards a person trying to help is uncommon. Anyway, a reason for a man or woman with past experience of abuse from a family member to seek professional help is that it is likely to be the most effective way of healing suffering due to events in the past.

Use of social media services by employers to establish a good match (fit) to their work culture

A good match (fit) to a work culture was mentioned by me in the section entitled “succeeding in a career” in the chapter on career choices. However, I did not expand on this because use of social media needs to be discussed well in order for the relevance of it to employers and employees to be clear. Although I like technology for its own sake very much (my “geek” side), I am “old-fashioned” in the sense of preferring telephone and e-mail to social media for communication. Unlike many young people nowadays, I did not grow up with the internet. Maybe this is the reason why use of social media has not become a major part of my life so far. Therefore, you can imagine my surprise when I spoke to young men and women in the taxi while driving on night-shifts and discovered the great extent to which young people are involved with social media use at present. Following this discovery, I thought that I should include a chapter featuring use of social media. Before covering the topics of use of social media with respect to popularity, sex and relationships, I wish to discuss employment issues.

Hopefully, this will provide an important perspective on use of social media because its use leaves a trail, which can be good and bad, depending on which social group one wishes to fit into. Hence, a fit would be good and exclusion would be bad, so is more from the perspective of the individual than in a general sense.

One of my taxi passengers during a night-shift was the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of a company. After discussing the purpose of my book, including its relevance to career choices, he gave me permission to include points we spoke about. His company was good to its employees. For example, it hosted generous Christmas celebrations. In order to help young men and women with decisions relating to promoting themselves when applying for jobs, I asked him what he looks for in an employee and how he decides whom to employ. The CEO told me that he only had about 10 minutes to view a curriculum vitae (CV or resumé)! He also said that the interview is important to form an impression of a prospective employee. However, he also said that social media (e.g. Facebook) is very important. The CEO uses a Google internet search to check on the prospective employee. He said that people should think carefully about what they post on social media websites such as Facebook because prospective employers do check them. Therefore, creating a conservative impression on professional social media networks such as LinkedIn would not help because employers may consider all social media an individual uses.

Employers seem to want to know as much as possible about a prospective employee.

The CEO said that confidence is important in a prospective employee because he or she must be trustworthy. Therefore, if the employer suspects that the prospective employee has something to hide, it is better not to take the risk to employ him or her. Therefore, people need to feel good about themselves and in expressing who they are. He said that it did not matter if a prospective employee was gay or religious!

Work culture is of major importance. The CEO said that many businesses spend a great deal of time creating a work culture and a brand image (of a product known by a certain name). A prospective employee must fit the work culture. If not, such as with Facebook posts, this can be a problem. If a person does not fit a given work culture, he or she should simply target another business that has a matching work culture. The CEO said that an interview and checking social media could confirm these impressions. Therefore, it is worth reading about or checking the work culture or brand impressions of a business before applying for work there. Moreover, I have noticed that many companies want to be seen to be popular for employment to attract talented people. Thus nowadays opportunities exist for openly gay people to increase diversity in companies, which also would not wish to turn away talented gay men and women. However, the issue of fit to a work culture mentioned by the CEO applies to gay and straight people.

The CEO said that subtle impressions made a big difference when hiring or employing people. He needed to be confident that the personality and interests of a person would match the work culture. He wanted to make sure that a person would feel positive about and enthusiastically promote a brand. Conversely, it could be expensive for a business if harm were done to a brand by employing the wrong person. This would create a bad impression. Hence, fit to the work culture is good for business and helps a prospective employee to be happy at work.

At this point it could be assumed that I am taking a conservative viewpoint and unless one has conservative views and avoids fun then one cannot secure a good job. However, this is not the impression I wish to make. If businesses do not meet the needs and wishes of people, they cannot make money. Indeed, as discrimination against gay men and women declines further, a vast market of business opportunities can expand for enterprising people who are prepared to take the risks of starting a business. Businesses frequently fail and doing business can involve long hours and little money, even if they offer independence for the boss.

Presently, many employers wish to be seen as “gay-friendly”, although it is good for a prospective employee to be certain before seeking work at supposedly gay-friendly workplaces! Fit to a work culture need not be conservative or without fun.

Another of my taxi passengers while working a night-shift was a young lady with colourfully dyed hair. She was happy to have her comments in this book. The young lady had friends she suspected were gay and we discussed gay issues as well as work. As I have been discussing work culture in this section of the book, I wish to pass on what she said.



The young lady had alternative views and style; however, fellow employees at her place of work did not care and neither did the customers. Indeed, they all liked this! She said that she worked with an “awesome” group and they had “wicked fun” at work. This work place had an alternative work culture but the same conditions applied about which the CEO had spoken to me. It is important for a given employee to fit the work culture and want to promote a brand.

Social media and desiring popularity

As I had written in the previous section, young men and women told me about how prominent social media is in the lives of young people at present. Given the importance of social media for self-expression and communication, I thought that it could be helpful to discuss a few major issues which arose in discussions I had with taxi passengers during my night-shifts on duty. A young straight man with whom I discussed intimacy and sex in the chapter entitled “coming out, intimacy, relationships and marriage” told me about use of social media by young people in great detail. His comments were confirmed in my discussions with other young men and women and I shall provide them because he gave me permission. It is understood that people may not agree with his statements but I wish to include them in this book because they illustrate the way in which social media is potentially being used. Although there may be inaccuracies, it appears to be essential to attempt to address this area with attention to details as reported to me. Regardless of the truth or untruth of my observations, I shall provide comments based on my experience, which I hope will be helpful. I apologise to the readers if I do not get it quite right in spite of my attempts to do so!

The wish to be popular appears to be a major issue and reason for self-promotion via social media networks. Although I shall write about Facebook, similar issues apply to use of other social media services, such as Twitter and Tumblr. There may be more social media services available as technology expands, bringing more choice, although its use may be determined more by preferences of friends and social contacts than individual tastes for software features.

Young ladies seem to want popularity more than young guys through use of social media but young ladies and guys seem to feel the need for validation from friends because the technology is available to easily obtain it, according to the young straight man who I mentioned earlier. One can become popular using Facebook from home, without going out. In my opinion, this reduces the opportunities for meeting friends in person, missing out on some enjoyment in life. It is understandable that the modern world is increasingly busy for young people, making meeting in person difficult but I think that this is a cultural problem which can be solved in the future. The young straight man said that not trying to be popular makes one feel bad. He said that it was important to get many “likes” on Facebook (expressions of approval which automatically share the item liked with friends). Furthermore, young ladies feel the need to get likes or they think that they are not pretty and have a poor self-image.

The young man thought that people should accept social media technology without it ruling their lives, stating that liking photos “is a big deal”, as is being or not being invited to an event on Facebook. He said that if one does not chat with friends all day and text frequently, one is “lame” (boring or uninspiring). With regard to this, I agree with his comment that there is too much communication and that a person needs to have time for him- or herself. In less than 20 years, large numbers of people are pressured by the need to be available at any time, wherever they are. Initially, this appeared to be important for work but now it is extending to social interaction.

With the need to be popular, a great deal of activity is involved. According to the young man, popularity on Facebook is fake but is seen to be needed.

Popularity need not be positive but can also be negative. The young straight man told me of the term “keyboard warrior”, for a person who expresses him- or herself boldly on social media networks, such as Facebook. This need not necessarily be cyberbullying but can still cause problems.

However, he said that cyberbullying on Facebook occurs less now than it did due to awareness of bad consequences resulting from it. Other people told me about internet “trolling”. This is the practice of posting nasty comments on the internet. This may be just for the sake of doing so, rather than for a specific reason. From my observations, a person may be nasty to boost the ego of him- or herself. For this person, if achieving popularity is difficult it may be easier to achieve notoriety (negative popularity), hence being the person known for saying or writing something nasty. Moreover, negativity can be used to provoke a response which could be perceived as exciting, no matter what its nature. In other words, the person might then be noticed, having attention rather than being ignored.

Should any reader be participating in internet trolling, it is worth considering that the greatest attention can be gained when comments or actions are positive and self-sustaining. A search for famous quotations would reveal the truth of this. Receiving attention by positive means may seem hard to do but not as hard as one might think! Trolling is difficult to address by an individual internet user because it is likely to become worse after doing anything, unless one can meet the unexpressed needs of a particular internet troll. Determining what might be motivating the trolling can be unpleasant and time-consuming. However, this is pointless if an internet troll just enjoys causing chaos and has no other reason. The simplest remedy is not to engage a troll in any way but to ignore him or her, even when the trolling is unpleasant! Probably, the troll will then seek another target. Undoubtedly, little I could write would reduce the practice of internet trolling but companies providing social media services appear to wish to keep the internet friendly. Thus there can be bad consequences for people if they are persistently unpleasant through use of social media. If comments are too nasty, then there is help available for those people affected by such comments, as I discussed in the section on cyberbullying in this chapter.

Before moving on to the topics of sex and relationships for young straight people as relevant to social media, I wish to comment on the quest for popularity. No doubt we humans are like grains of sand in the desert and it feels good to have self-expression and natural to desire to be noticed for this. However, there are a number of needs which can be satisfied for good mental health, which I discuss in the chapter entitled “mental health and self-harm practices, including suicide”. Satisfying various needs is complicated and there is limited time and money available to people to do this (some more than others). Therefore, I think it is helpful to watch where one’s life is going, in terms of one’s activities (social and otherwise). Then one can always be sure that the pace of life is not getting exhausting. This does not mean planning out all the details of one’s life and making it boring but leading a constructive life and also seeing where it is going. Another point to make relates to standards by which one can compare oneself to others.

Popularity can mean creating a better impression or performing better than someone else. However, there are always going to be people who succeed more or less in doing these things. How one will rate can depend on the standard of measurement chosen by others. In my opinion, one should cherish one’s own features, abilities, knowledge and skills.



In other words, one should feel unique and special because there is no-one else with the same characteristics! This may seem obvious but I think it is difficult because it needs a great deal of inner work (thought and decision). To feel unique and special, one does not need to compete with others for popularity. In general, I think that it is fine to seek to be popular as long as it continues to bring one more happiness and success than sadness and failure to achieve the goals one wants in life, according to one's own values.

Social media and its influence on sex and relationships of young straight people

A number of young straight people told me that it was important to discuss social media and its roles in sex and relationships in this book. It is difficult to cover this topic accurately based on reports received. Therefore, as I had written at the start of the previous section, please forgive me for any inaccuracies. This area seems to be so important to people that I would like to attempt to address it. As in the previous section, I wish to provide comments from one young straight man with whom I had a conversation about intimacy and sex in the chapter entitled “coming out, intimacy, relationships and marriage”. His comments are written in this book with his permission and have been confirmed in discussions with others. As in the previous section, I am referring mainly to Facebook but similar issues apply to the use of other social media services.

With sex and relationships, there were general differences in male and female points of view, as I found when discussing intimacy and sex in the chapter mentioned at the start of this section. This is reflected in the way social media services are used by young ladies and guys.

The young straight man told me that young straight ladies (more than guys) seem to be attracted to people of the opposite sex with a high social status, at least as indicated via social media. In contrast, young straight guys seem less interested in social status but are more interested in the attractiveness of females using social media services. However, there are related issues I shall discuss soon. Many people using social media seem to be disturbed about bad or supposedly ugly photos of themselves. Hence, they may edit their photos using Photoshop® software to make the images look better and compare photos of others viewed via social media to assess whether or not they are sufficiently good-looking. Young people look at the number of likes received for items posted on Facebook (discussed in the previous section concerning “popularity”).

Young ladies respect guys who receive many likes, as this signifies popularity and higher social status. However, there is a difference for young guys. The young straight man told me that if a young lady receives many likes, then it is assumed that she is more likely to have casual sex. Hence, fewer likes can attract guys who might view a less popular young lady as more likely to be faithful (as a partner). Therefore, if a young lady is looking for a steady relationship rather than just sex, this should be considered by her if she had not already been informed of this.

The issue of attractiveness affects responses by young straight guys to invitations to an event received via social media services. The young straight man I spoke to in the taxi told me that young straight guys wish to see who is invited to an event on Facebook. They want to see which of the ladies attending the event are attractive (“hot”). Then they look at the number of likes. If an attractive young straight lady has many likes then she is more likely to have casual sex. Of course, this means that she can be taken advantage of, whether or not she wants this.

Although it could surprise young straight ladies, young straight men who spoke to me expressed some concern about such use of social media by young people. It seemed that they believed that young ladies should be less concerned about popularity. Additionally, it appeared that there really were young guys out there who would appreciate them for who they are and that such guys might want them to be careful about the impression they make on social media. From my discussions with young straight guys, even if it is not obvious, trustworthy young ladies are much sought after!

Social media services also influence relationships of young people. The young straight man told me that a relationship should be announced via social media. Hence, a genuine relationship can be referred to by the phrase “Facebook official”. The young straight man also said that a young lady should have the courage to stand by the man with whom she is in a relationship on Facebook.

In my opinion, people in a loving relationship like to share news of it with others for validation of their decision to be a couple. Therefore, a more old-fashioned person (such as me) has to acknowledge that social media can be used as a way that two people in a relationship can demonstrate their love and commitment to others.



Chapter 8 : Looking good on a low budget

Of course, it appears to be pretentious of me to write a chapter on looking good. Undoubtedly, many or most of the readers are going to be better looking than I am. However, as I have often been asked for tips on various aspects of health and beauty, I shall include them here. Of course, what I am writing about will not apply to everybody. It appears that how to look good without spending much money is something which interests people, not necessarily male or female, gay or straight. Furthermore, when dating, appearance is something which can draw the attention of people in a crowded room. Making the most of one's capacity to attract positive attention also can increase self-confidence. Of course, if the reader believes that I have nothing useful to offer about looking good, then just skip this chapter.

Some readers may have had the experience, occasionally or often, of feeling unattractive or inferior in certain situations. Reasons vary but can include being very much overweight, having body odour or bad breath, or wearing unfashionable clothing. This can happen in a variety of circumstances and can often be ignored but may prevent some people from shopping for clothing (such as pants), going out and enjoying themselves or going to the gym. In all fairness to staff working in jobs where they deal with people, it can be difficult to treat others with respect always and not show obvious favouritism when interacting with people in a group. This has been my own experience during my work as a taxi driver and university lecturer. Of course, frequent bad experiences can influence how one feels about oneself!

At different times in my life, I have not had or earned much money, such as when I was a student. This has allowed me to understand what it feels like; and to think of how to stay healthy and try to keep my appearance good without spending too much money. In my opinion, spending a great deal of money on appearance is not necessarily helpful. There are many products and services available, from people who claim that they improve appearance. This book will not address these and they should simply be investigated on a case by case basis. Some may be helpful to certain individuals but not others, or be expensive. Some products or services might even be harmful or have unrealistic or fraudulent claims about them. In contrast, what will be considered are low cost and practical methods to try to maintain health and look good.

At no time do I claim that anything I write is guaranteed to maintain or improve health or appearance. I hope that common sense will prevail and wish the reader to be the judge. Choices depend on money and time available, as well as personal preference. For example, someone may be too poor or busy to attend a local gym.

In addition, a person may choose not to explore healthy options because the effort involved appears to be too great, or in order to fit in with friends and loved ones who do not make the effort. Nonetheless, after reading this book I hope that people might have inspiration or encouragement to further and continue with their healthy activities.

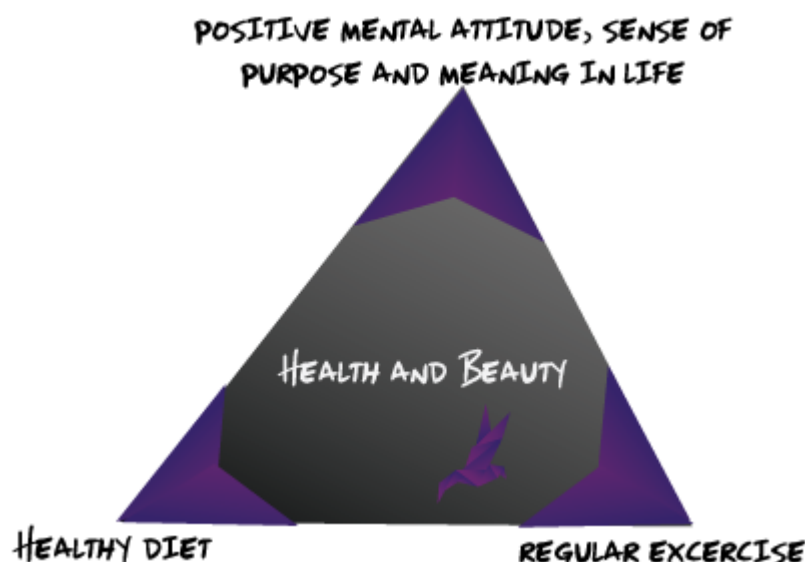
Although healthy practices are not guaranteed to promote health or good appearance, I believe there is a strong link. One case where healthy practices may not maintain health can be illness, such as that which can lead to death.

Terminal cancer may be an example. However, I think it is worthwhile to make healthy choices in all cases but at the same time it is important not to be too fussy or cranky. I am a vegetarian, choosing not to eat meat, fish, seafood or eggs. After writing this book

I am sure someone will say, “Ah, that’s not good”; if I eat out and order deep fried potato wedges if there are no other vegetarian options for me! Please note that I am far from perfect and am only writing this book to be helpful, having seen a need for it.

A philosophy of health potentially also promotes beauty

Overall, I think that health and appearance can best be maintained or improved by a coordinated effort. In other words, by approaching it in a number of ways at the same time. Use of symbols is a powerful way to direct thought and attention and to make concepts easier to communicate. Just think of a love heart or the skull and crossbones symbol. Therefore I wish to simplify my own philosophy for health and beauty to a triangle, as illustrated.



It started as a philosophy for health but I found that it also improved my appearance. At least I have received comments (or compliments) to this effect. Indeed, it has become like a philosophy of life, when my biomedical research career has become problematic to sustain and there seems to be a need to live this philosophy and be open about it for the benefits to spread.

A healthy diet and exercise synergise to promote health more than double of either alone. Furthermore, when one adds a positive attitude and a sense of meaning and purpose in life, the benefits multiply even more. One can refer to this as a spiritual dimension but I do not necessarily intend it to be the same as a religion. Now that I have explained what I mean by a coordinated effort to maintain health and appearance, I shall discuss all three aspects of this and suggest practical ways to achieve this at the same time.

Food and drink are essential to life itself and one cannot survive long with neither of these. Therefore, I shall discuss a healthy diet first. One personal choice of mine is to be a vegetarian. I do not think of it as a mark of superiority or want to boast about it.



Although I believe that it is easier to stay healthy and to look and stay beautiful if on a vegetarian diet, it can be hard to prove this and my attempts would probably bore the reader. Thus I shall not attempt to convince or provide proof. Furthermore, it is a personal choice and as such, I do not wish to push or impose it. None-the-less, I have included a section to address vegetarian and vegan dietary choices.

What I wish to discuss primarily is simply a healthy diet.

Many books have been written on a healthy diet. It would not be helpful to analyse them in a scholarly manner, as I have a tendency to do. Furthermore, diet varies according to cultural and personal preference, medical or health requirements.

Additionally, what is healthy for one person may be unhealthy for another. Here I shall not provide a food pyramid of any sort but try to apply common sense. In my opinion, several aspects of a healthy diet are rarely discussed, so it is necessary to start from scratch.

Fast food and reducing excessive fat and salt

Firstly, if one's diet is already healthy, there is no need to change it! I am not trying to foster fussiness or crankiness. During my time as a taxi driver, I have frequently met requests of my passengers to go to a fast food outlet drive-through. Therefore, I have had a chance to view the food choices of many young people without even trying to do this. Much of the food available at such places is not healthy but eaten because people are hungry and the food tastes good. For example, food deep-fried in oil and potato chips with excessive salt. Vegetarian food which is deep-fried or with excessive salt can also be unhealthy. However, deep-frying is a fast and efficient way to prepare food, so may be the only practical way to cater for big events. Eating unhealthy fast food must be balanced against what one normally eats. Unhealthy food eaten occasionally is not normally a problem. What one does regularly matters far more.

Deep-fried food and a diet high in saturated fat and cholesterol is bad for the blood vessels. It promotes the development of atherosclerosis (blockage and hardening of the arteries). With time this can greatly increase the risk of cardiovascular disease; namely, heart disease and stroke. In the case of stroke, a blood vessel in the brain can break or block blood supply. This can cause paralysis and death. Such a bad diet can also increase the risk of diabetes and then blindness and risk of amputations due to poor blood supply to the fingers, toes, arms and legs. Diabetes itself is a cardiovascular disease risk factor for heart disease and stroke. In addition, deep-fried food has a high energy value and can easily cause weight gain when stored in the body. Although I do not like being negative, it is important to outline the major risks of a regular fast food (deep-fried) diet high in saturated fat and cholesterol.

Salt in the diet is indirectly related to a gain in blood pressure. Sodium in salt (sodium chloride) is a major regulator of blood pressure in the body. It is easy to get used to salty flavours, hence, needing to add it to food before even tasting it. However, it is not difficult to get used to eating less salt. Small changes, such as buying unsalted butter from the supermarket to replace salted butter, can be worth doing because most people eat far too much salt in their diet. It is easy to get used to the flavour of unsalted butter and less dietary salt in general, reserving food such as salty chips for special occasions.

Major risk factors for heart attacks and strokes are age (counted risk gradually increasing from the age of forty), blood pressure, blood cholesterol, being male (yes, it's unfair), diabetes and smoking. Hence the need to avoid increases in blood pressure due to dietary salt and a high saturated fat and cholesterol (deep-fried) fast food diet.

It is also worth having blood pressure tested at a doctor's clinic on any routine visit from the age of 40. This is not difficult to check. Even when living a healthy lifestyle, blood pressure can be high naturally, even very much so. However, there are many medications which can bring it down to normal, if necessary. This can be life-saving.

Although excessive fatty and salty fast food is bad to eat, there are often healthier choices when eating out. Of course, when eating out with others it can be more difficult, especially if food ordered is to be shared with others who do not care about healthy food. Limited choices are available when eating out, so one should try to be healthy but flexible. Friends do not need to suffer. Although I am a vegetarian, most of my friends are not. They respect my right to eat vegetarian food but we usually eat out at non-vegetarian eating places, so that we can all be happy. Anyway, whatever food or drink one consumes should be as healthy as possible.

Healthy food

Although some people may consider it a silly question, it could be asked what healthy food really is. One answer would be the source of molecules one takes into the body to keep it functioning in peak condition. The body is not one piece which cannot be divided. Rather it is made up of systems of organs, each organ being composed of tissues and then cells in turn. Each cell is like a brick which makes up parts of a building, such as a house one can live in, perhaps like the body can be thought to be. A big advantage of having natural components made of cells is that the cells can be rearranged in an enormous number of ways to give rise to many living beings on this planet (and conceivably others somewhere in the universe). To explain the functions of different systems of the body properly, one must consider structure (anatomy) and function (physiology). This book will not consider the details of bodily structure and function but any good textbook of anatomy and physiology would explain features of the amazing human body in detail.^{6,24}

The body requires different types of molecules taken into it as food. Some molecules are used for structure, growth and maintenance of the body. Others are used as fuel sources. Much in the way that the economy of a country can be reduced to its currency in terms of coins, so can the fuel sources of the body be reduced to molecules in common for energy, where chemical energy in bonds between atoms of food molecules is used for energy and wastes are removed. All standard dietary foods eaten can be used for energy, mostly fuels being carbohydrates, fats and proteins. Carbohydrates and fats are the main energy sources because proteins are preferentially used for structure (building). In addition to obtaining energy and bodily structural components from food, the body can make its own from simpler molecules, building them up. Indeed, during the breaks between meals or snacks or during peak demand (exercise), the body makes and distributes the fuel molecules it needs and existing fat stores can be used for energy.



In addition to dietary carbohydrates, fats and proteins, there are a number of other molecule types which the body needs for healthy living. The chemical processes required for life are well explained within the field of biochemistry. The chemical reactions required for life would be too slow for survival if the body did not have catalysts called enzymes to speed up these chemical reactions. Most enzymes are proteins and many require small amounts of vitamins and minerals for their normal functions. Hence a healthy diet should not only contain carbohydrates, fats and proteins but also vitamins and minerals, needed in much smaller amounts. In many cases, the body can make the molecules required when they are not eaten in a meal or snack but not all molecules needed. Such molecules are called “essential”, such as the essential amino acids which make up proteins. Most chemical reactions require water as a solvent, within which chemical reactions can take place. For this, water is required; hence, good hydration in the diet.

Therefore, healthy food supplies the body with carbohydrates, fats, proteins, vitamins, minerals and water. When eating and drinking, many other molecules taken in are not needed or are even harmful. These are eliminated by the body as wastes.

The liver and kidneys are important for detoxifying harmful molecules and eliminating them. After food is eaten and digested, wastes pass out of the body. Although fibre in the diet (mostly from plant sources) is such a waste product, the presence of fibre in food keeps the digestive process healthy, preventing avoidable constipation and diarrhoea. Chemical reactions supplying energy for life mostly require oxygen, taken into the lungs from the air. The blood moves substances for life around the body, the blood being pumped by the heart, as long as it is healthy enough to function; and in turn blood carries wastes for removal. A healthy diet promotes optimal bodily function, with the least need to detoxify harmful molecules.

In order to be as healthy as possible and to live well, various food groups should be eaten and enough water in liquids should be taken in. Food groups rich in carbohydrates are grains and their derivatives (such as rice, oats in oatmeal or muesli, wheat in bread or pasta or cereals) and sugars or sugary foods (not healthy in excess). Fruits have sugars but not concentrated and are healthy. Non-animal foods rich in proteins are grains and their derivatives, nuts, seeds, legumes (lentils, peas and beans). Animal sources of proteins are meat, fish, seafood and poultry (such as chickens), eggs and dairy products (such as milk and cheese). Fat sources include oils, butter, margarine and nuts (also high in protein). When a person is healthy, the author believes that the body helps to decide the balance of healthy foods to eat. Therefore, one can be mindful of healthy food cravings. The greater the variety of foods eaten, the greater is the chance that all molecules required by the body are taken in. Exercise increases the amounts of carbohydrates and proteins required and growth (such as during childhood), pregnancy, sickness and ill-health also change dietary requirements. If totally unsure of nutrition, the author thinks that it is best to follow the example of healthy people. Many healthy people are happy to explain what they eat and drink and how they live their lives, in order that more people should experience greater health and happiness.

It is hard to make absolute rules for nutrition because dietary choices are personal and nutritional needs vary from person to person.

A healthy diet promotes bodily health and potentially also beauty. Of course, beauty is controversial and beauty can exist at any age. Examples of beauty promoted by health are attractive physical proportions of the body, without fat accumulating in deposits (such as at the belly); an appealing radiance to the skin and clear and shining eyes. However, even without all these features a person can be beautiful and beauty itself is subject to the perception of each individual, so not up to the author to dictate. It is the opinion of the author that a diet consisting of, or higher in, nonanimal sources of food groups make it easier to maintain health. However, there is no absolute proof for this. Furthermore, the greater one restricts a diet, the greater the risk that important nutrients are left out if the body cannot produce them, leading to loss of health.

Choosing healthy natural plant-based foods

The emphasis can be on “choosing” because one can eat well, even when not cooking or when dining out. This may happen when one is busy, such as due to certain jobs compensated by earning a great deal of money, or when both studying and working for money. It is cheaper if one eats home-cooked food and one then has more say over what is eaten. Generally, the less processed that food is, the healthier. However, many healthy foods can only be found in a processed form.

Select foods to eat which contain the required food groups. If there is too little food from any of these groups in one meal, then make up for this later in the day. Therefore, eat a variety of grains, protein sources and small amounts of fats every day; everything balanced and in moderation. Even fats are essential, such as “omega-3” oils in plant seeds (such as flaxseed oil) or fish, especially oily fish.²⁵ When eaten in significant proportions in the diet, omega-3 oils reduce the risk of diabetes and problems with blood vessels, which can cause heart attacks and stroke. Plant-based foods are high in vitamins and minerals. Therefore, a healthy diet should include a good selection of vegetables and some fruits every day. There can be no harm in dividing nutrition for the average day into three meals (rather than just two) with a couple of healthy snacks between meals, to reduce excessive hunger (hence overeating) and spread the nutrition better.

Buying healthy fruits and vegetables

If shopping for food to cook, again the less that a food is processed, the more likely it is to promote health without containing anything unhealthy or having nutrients destroyed during processing. When shopping, look for seasonal fruits and vegetables. Nuts, seeds and grains (and their derivatives) are easier to find all year round.

However, certain fruits and vegetables are more common during certain seasons. At these times, they are highest in nutrients, not lost during cold storage to sell out-of-season. It is easier to recognise seasonal fruits and vegetables. They are more common than those which are out-of-season. They are usually cheaper and often look fresher. Recognising fresh foods is something which often needs experience but without this, one can look for fruits and vegetables which seem to stand out and say, “Eat me!” They may be less bruised and blemished and may be shinier, although wax may have been applied to make them look shinier. Good fruits and vegetables are often denser (heavier for their size). Weekly shopping, rather than daily shopping, can save time for fun and/or healthy activities. However, shopping less frequently can lead to raw fruits and vegetables spoiling and needing to be placed in the garbage (or garden compost) bin.



Due to a previous problem with stomach acidity and “heartburn” symptoms, I still avoid sugar in my diet. It seems to aggravate the old symptoms, just as spicy or very acidic food and drinks, tea, coffee, and alcoholic drinks can do for some people. However, I like to eat a piece of fruit with every meal, usually at the start to activate my digestion optimally. Therefore, I have become used to selecting healthy fruits which taste delicious and can be eaten as desserts as a substitute for sweet foods. When fruits are tasty, one is more likely to want to eat them, not just leave them to decorate the table in a fruit bowl. It is not polite to eat food before buying it and it is not necessary to squeeze fruits to check for softness before buying the ripe fruit, which is usually tasty and sweeter. One can learn to select tasty fruits by appearance, remembering the fruit and the corresponding flavour after eating. Furthermore, especially ripe fruit is usually cheapest because it will not last to be sold later!

Here are some ways to spot tasty fruit to start with, based on my personal experience. Bananas are especially sweet and tasty when bright yellow with many brown spots. If bought yellow, the brown spots appear on standing at room temperature. Apples can be very tasty and sweet; look for colour and smell the aroma (they may be waxed). They are also often cheap when sold in bags. Dark grapes are especially tasty when plump and full-looking but with a greyish haze (called “bloom”). “White” grapes are usually green but are tastier and sweeter when yellow or with a brownish tinge. Grape seeds are high in healthy natural chemicals called antioxidants^{26,27} and grapes with seeds are usually cheaper than seedless grapes. Although more time is needed to spit out seeds, it is good not only to buy seedless grapes.

Tropical fruits can be delicious. Pineapples are good when they are very yellow or amber. They may have a slight fuzz of mould at one or both ends. Just as other very ripe fruit, there may be fruit flies buzzing around them. In such case, follow the fruit flies; they know what is ripe and sweet! Mangoes are nicest when they are cheapest and often sold in little bags or multiples (two to five). Then they have blackish spots or patches and an oily liquid oozing from an end. They often also have a nice colour or reddish “blush”. There are fancy ways of preparing these. However, when inexperienced simply cut them through the centre (away from the pointed ends) on a chopping board over a kitchen sink. Twist the ends apart, then cut out the pip in the centre and eat over the sink (messy but tasty). When sold cheaply in-season mangoes may also be larger, with more fruit “flesh”. Papayas (“paw paws”) are ripe and tasty when a bright yellow/orange colour, with little or no green on the outside. In my opinion, tropical fruits (such as pineapples, mangoes and papayas) taste best when grown in tropical countries, so when visiting or living close to the equator, the choice of seasonal fruits should be obvious!

Honeydew melons are very tasty, soft inside and sweet when bright yellow outside with small brown spots. Watermelons (seeded or seedless) are nice when bright red inside with visible cracks or crevices. Therefore, these are easier to buy in-season and when already cut for sale. Pears bought in-season but unripe and green, should be allowed to ripen at room temperature at home until yellow. Kiwi fruits are usually too unripe when bought, so these should be allowed to ripen at room temperature at home. Although “golden kiwi fruits” may be more expensive than the standard kiwi fruit (green inside, rather than yellowish), the good flavour can justify buying them periodically. In general, store ripe fruit cool in the refrigerator, so it lasts longer and allow unripe fruit to ripen outside the refrigerator (storage together with a ripe banana can speed up ripening). Blueberries and other berries with reddish juice (as also black and red grapes) contain antioxidants good for the blood vessels. However, it is often most practical to buy these frozen in packs, so that they are cheap and ripe when thawed for eating. The cheapest brands are often excellent, in my opinion!

There are many other ways to select tasty fruit. However, the examples above are easy to spot and once such fruit is eaten can illustrate my point. Consider also making fruit juices with a blender, if there is too much fruit left over (although it is better to buy only a little more than enough and less next time). Fruit juices can also potentially be frozen. Many fruits make a nice juice if also blended with a slice of ginger or a dash of cinnamon powder. All this can make it less tempting to eat chocolate, ice cream, biscuits, cakes, puddings and other typical sweet desserts instead of just plain fruit, maybe with yoghurt served on the side, giving a big boost to health.

It is easier to shop and cook if doing it for a reason. This can be done to keep healthy, save money and be in control of looking good; at least trying to look or keep looking beautiful. In my opinion, cooking to recipe(s) in a cook book can make shopping and cooking more exciting and strengthen a resolution to be and remain healthy. However, friends will often tell others about recipes which are much-liked by people they know. If unsure of which style of cooking is appealing and one has not often eaten out at restaurants or cafés, many cooking shows on television or cook books for borrowing or viewing at the local library can provide ideas. Generally, stirfry cooking is the fastest, such as in a wok over a gas stove.

However, steaming meals in a “rice cooker” can enable less oil to be used (hence less fattening) and allows meals to be prepared quickly, with little washing-up afterwards. Of course, being vegetarian, I am inspired by vegetarian cook books. So far, the cook books of Kurma Dasa (well-known for his vegetarian and Hare Krishna cooking) are personally the easiest that I have found from which to cook. Recipe quantities seem to be fine for me, even on cooking recipes for the first time and the prepared dishes taste wonderful to me, perhaps almost without exception. One cook book by Kurma Dasa which I find especially easy to use is called “Quick Vegetarian Dishes”.²⁸ Nonetheless, there are many excellent cook books and it may seem unfair to display favouritism here. Indeed, any inspiring source of recipes (non-vegetarian also) will do on the quest to stay healthy and beautiful through diet.

Tips for vegetarians and vegans

People with special dietary needs have to take steps to modify the food and drinks they consume. Nowadays, it is not difficult to obtain suggestions and advice on how to approach diets of people with special needs. Here, vegetarian and vegan diets are considered because it is a dietary choice I have suggested. A diet considered to be vegetarian is generally one without meat, poultry, fish and seafood. Dairy products are often included but eggs can be excluded. Some vegetarians do not eat garlic, onions or leeks because they are thought of as exciting the mind or the passions (lust). This view comes from traditional, spiritual or religious backgrounds. One reason which I have heard given for this is the practice of meditation, to encourage peaceful meditative practice. In my opinion, having these foods in a vegetarian diet is healthy, even if eaten in small quantities. However, everybody must act according to their beliefs and conscience.

A vegan is a person who avoids all animal products (such as dairy products and honey) in their diet. One advantage of the vegan diet is that it helps to reduce carbon transferred to the atmosphere indirectly through reduced demands on livestock industries. Of course, this would keep animal farmers unhappy because many would have to find alternatives for farming or other jobs. Furthermore, global food production would be more efficient if many more people were on a vegan diet and the millions of starving people on the planet would be easier to feed.



As stated before, I think that a vegetarian diet has benefits for beauty, although there is no proof I have seen so far. The same goes for a vegan diet; however, it is slightly more restricted and thus more attention needs to be given to maintaining adequate nutrition.

Vegetarians and vegans need to be mindful of some dietary factors. Maintaining a sufficient protein source is important. Plant proteins, such as from grains, legumes, nuts and seeds, need to be combined to provide a balanced range of all the amino acids making up the human body. In contrast to animal proteins, a given plant protein source is often deficient in one or two essential amino acids.

Many famous dishes from cooking worldwide are basically vegetarian or vegan. One can see that plant protein sources in these dishes have been combined, such as rice and lentils, corn and beans, grains and nuts, grains and beans. Plant proteins do not need to be combined in the same meal but it is good to have different types of plant proteins at least daily. One can also choose to snack on plant protein sources. Nuts and seeds are a combination I like. They are healthy, relatively cheap and store well. If combined with dried fruit (such as sultanas [“white”] or raisins [dark]), the resulting snack can be very delicious indeed but higher in sugar (due to the dried fruit). Other special food requirements for vegetarians and vegans are more subtle.

Nutrients, vitamins and minerals which vegetarians and vegans may more easily be deficient in are vitamin B12, iron, calcium, zinc and omega-3 oils. The Vegetarian Resource Group website has much helpful information to avoid deficiencies and lead an active and healthy life as a vegetarian or vegan.²⁹ Vegetarian sources of vitamin B12 include dairy products in general, eggs and fortified foods with added vitamin B12 (soy milk and breakfast cereals), Marmite® yeast extract and fermented foods (miso soup, yoghurt or tempeh). Lentils, beans and leafy vegetables which are dark green are good iron sources. Calcium is found in dairy products, tofu, broccoli, Chinese cabbage and kale, almonds, a number of fortified foods and drinks with added calcium (such as breakfast cereals and fruit juices). Peas, beans, lentils, nuts and grains are zinc sources. Examples of plant omega-3 oil sources are flaxseed oil (an excellent source) and flaxseeds, canola oil, walnut oil (which is usually expensive), walnuts, soybeans and tofu.^{25,29} It is best not to rely on individual food sources as a sole supply. As the reader can see, rather than targeting individual food sources, it is easier to have good nutrition by eating as great a variety of healthy foods as possible. It can also be more enjoyable this way.

In this book focusing on issues relating to gay people, pregnancy and childhood are not central topics. However, pregnancy can be a concern for vegetarians and vegans. The health of babies is promoted by paying attention to the diet during pregnancy and avoiding nutritional deficiencies. The same goes for raising children. However, it is good to seek advice of a medical doctor or dietician, who can assess individual lifestyle factors if having babies or raising children on a vegetarian or vegan diet, which is possible. Pregnant mothers and growing children have special nutritional needs, which should be considered.²⁹ If in doubt take medical advice before choosing the safer option for raising children, which would be to provide them with a standard non-vegetarian diet until they are old enough to choose for themselves and may then decide to be vegetarian or vegan like their parents.

Tips for weight loss and general health

Weight loss is a common goal in developed countries because not being overweight is seen to be an aspect of beauty in the modern “Western” culture. That being said, people who are overweight can also be beautiful and it is possible to choose clothing which flatters the figure of an overweight person. Beauty is perhaps often associated with rarity; hence, uncommon features. In the past and in other cultures, being overweight was especially beautiful, possibly because food was not plentiful. If this is thought to be nonsense, just look at the paintings of a number of European masters, such as Rubens! Different physical proportions of men and women seem to be subject to fashion.

Related to this are psychological problems associated with an unrealistic view of ideal weight. These are discussed in the chapter on mental health. Anyway, personality and inner qualities are major factors in attractiveness, in the opinions of many people with whom the author has spoken. However, to be happy with one’s body is important and so when concerned about weight, it can help to see beauty as partly dependent on time in history and place.

One reason I have been emphasising a vegetarian diet, is that it can be easier to lose weight as a vegetarian. Vegetarian and vegan diets have the advantage of having less saturated fat and cholesterol than animal-based diets. More omega-3 oils in the diet, along with less saturated fat, reduce risks of heart disease and strokes. This is often a reason for stating “lean meat” (with fat strips trimmed off) in healthy diets for non-vegetarians. Fatty and oily foods are high in energy and good to increase weight. For example, it is easy to gain weight if eating vegetarian foods deep-fried in ghee (clarified butter)! However, if there is an intention to keep the weight down, avoiding animal-based foods and substituting more plant-based foods can be helpful.

Weight loss results when the energy values of food and drinks (calories) are less than energy expended, such as by increasing exercise.³⁰ Therefore, being a vegetarian would not necessarily result in weight loss on a high calorie diet. There are genetic factors in being overweight, as there are to susceptibility to the form of diabetes for which being overweight is a risk factor. The bodies of some people are set to a higher natural weight (set-point theory), so that when a slim figure is attained, then hunger and efficiency of food energy use by the body increases. This makes losing weight harder for such people. To remain slim, some hunger may then always need to be endured. However, a few people on a diet to stay slim had said that hunger did not bother them after a while.

There are many weight-loss diets promoted for various reasons. People should be careful about trying diets to lose weight, especially if they are expensive. It is necessary to avoid being conned and losing a great deal of money. However, different diets may be beneficial to certain people, so it is difficult to generalise. In general, it is good to check diets carefully before trying them. Weight loss is far easier in conjunction with a good exercise programme. After joining a gym, programmes can be followed to lose weight and some general principles are given later in a section on exercise.

Although weight loss may occur as people simultaneously develop more muscle tone or visible muscle bulk from gym training with weights, one need not fear becoming too bulky. It usually needs a great deal of effort over considerable time to develop the physique of a bodybuilder, so if it is not desired, there need be no fear that it will happen suddenly with very little effort. However, it can sometimes be achieved slowly with patience, if a person finds this look attractive and wishes to build a great deal of muscle. Nevertheless, exercise and a calorie-restricted diet are keys to weight loss.



Regardless of exactly how weight is lost, food should be appealing. Perhaps it is easier to lose weight if a person is otherwise happy and leading an active life (also expending more energy). It can be possible to eat smaller portions with each meal, or to use low calorie snacks to stop hunger building up, such as a handful of sunflower seeds or a green apple. When losing weight it is still necessary to nourish oneself sufficiently. The body requires nutrients, such as vitamins and minerals, even when losing weight. Whichever way a person who wishes to lose weight does it, he or she deserves admiration because it requires some determination. If a diet is enjoyable it is easier to make it part of one's lifestyle and to be satisfied with food chosen.

Other than vitamins and minerals, there are many beneficial chemicals which are consumed in food. When a great variety of food is eaten, such beneficial chemicals are naturally present in the diet, so not too much attention has to be given to these. One group of beneficial chemicals are antioxidants,^{26,27} which can protect against cancer and the ageing process. Reducing ageing can make it easier to stay physically beautiful for longer, so it is good to consume a varied diet, naturally rich in antioxidants. Harking back to my common theme, I can say that a healthy vegetarian (or vegan) diet should normally be higher in antioxidants than a healthy nonvegetarian diet. Both cancer and ageing are promoted when charged molecules called free-radicals²⁷ bind to molecules important for the function of cells in the body and subsequently damage them. Antioxidants prevent damage caused by free radicals due to their special chemistry. This chemistry also allows light of different wavelengths to be absorbed, resulting in a range of different colours, like light separated into different colours by a glass prism. Hence, it is often easy to select fruits and vegetables rich in antioxidants because they are brightly coloured²⁶ and a variety of these should be selected as part of a healthy diet. Herbs and spices which make cooking taste good also contain antioxidants and other beneficial natural chemicals.

One good source of antioxidants is green tea, which has a more beneficial supply than black tea or coffee. Therefore, it can be healthy to substitute green tea for coffee as a commonly consumed beverage. Green tea has a flavour which not all people like but it can be stimulating. In fact, on my night-shifts in the taxi, I did not routinely drink coffee or a cola drink but green tea from a thermos prepared beforehand.

The body detoxifies harmful substances for removal. Medicines are also processed by the body in the same manner. Indeed, this natural process can be annoying for pharmaceutical companies, which must take this into account when developing drugs that need to be active in the body for a sufficient time. In order to be healthy, it is good to reduce intake of substances which are not necessary for good nutrition. One need not eliminate them but intake should be moderate. Examples are alcohol, coffee and sugar. One means of reducing sugar in the diet is to substitute other sweet foods for it, such as honey, dates or just plain fruit. Hence one can use raw sugar, brown sugar, "black strap molasses" or honey instead of white sugar, or just avoid it altogether. These substitutes have more beneficial nutrients than white sugar. I do without sugar because of my previous stomach problem, aggravated by sugary foods. It is easy to get used to sugar substitutes, as one can get used to unsalted butter to avoid too much salt in the diet. The use of artificial sweeteners is also possible, such as in cups of tea. However, they are not natural. Even if they reduce calorie intake, the body must break them down and eliminate them as with other artificial substances. For optimum health, I believe it is important to make everything eaten count whenever possible but without being cranky.

Supplementation with vitamins and minerals is really only needed if there are insufficient amounts of them in the diet. Generally, this occurs if a person is overworked, ill, under undue stress or has little time or money to eat or cook a wellbalanced diet. Older people (perhaps from 50 years of age) can consider routine vitamin and mineral supplementation; however, for young and healthy people with a good diet and an average lifestyle, it should not usually be necessary. The Office of Dietary Supplements of the National Institutes of Health (USA) has good information on vitamins, minerals and other common supplements, including many fact sheets.³¹

Healthy food shopping on a low budget

One problem when wishing to buy and cook healthy food is lack of money. This can happen when employment is difficult to find, more common when one is outside the range of youth and experience which is often preferred for employment. Alternatively, when one is a student there may be little or no income. In this age of worldwide economic problems in developed countries, a low income or poverty is more common than before. However, it is still possible to economise and much can be done on a low budget to eat well.

Meat, fish, poultry and seafood generally cost more than fruits, vegetables, legumes, grains, nuts and seeds. Hence, vegetarian choices can often make the money go further. When there is little money, it is necessary to budget, so as not to overspend by mistake. Hence a weekly, monthly or annual plan for expenses can be made. With access to Excel or other spreadsheet software on a computer one can produce a budget which can be more easily altered and revised than one written on paper.

Major expenses such as rent, electricity, gas and water can be entered into a budget and set against income. This leaves money for food and entertainment (where possible). One advantage of healthy living is that there are fewer doctors' bills, although more money is ultimately spent on fruit and vegetable groceries (unfortunately, often more expensive than packaged fast food).

Shopping cheaply is made easier if more people on a low budget can shop together. Speciality shops (greengrocers) selling only fruit and vegetables can offer many of these more cheaply than supermarkets but one reason not to go to fruit and vegetable shops is the need to buy at least one non-edible item (such as a toothbrush), so all the shopping can be done at once. If there are two people shopping (such as a couple), then they can split up and groceries can be bought more cheaply at the fruit and vegetable shop. Obviously, some groceries may still be cheaper at the supermarket but with experience, one can learn where bargains can be bought.

Even better value for fruits and vegetables are obtained when purchasing at markets. However, the minimum quantities which must be bought are often so large that it is not practical for one person to buy. However, it is possible for a group of people on a low budget to go to markets together, such as with 4 or 5 people in one car. Then each person can buy one or two prearranged food types in a large box. After arriving home later, the cost and the food can be shared, also reimbursing the driver. Then all people can have enough groceries for a week or two. Communication is important here, otherwise too many fruits or vegetables of one type might be purchased.



If the quantities purchased are sufficient, stock for soup can be made with the peel and edible off-cuts and waste (and frozen), allowing the budget to be stretched further and the maximum nutritional value from fruits and vegetables to be obtained. One advantage of soup, is that it can be stretched further by adding water!

Hence, trips to the markets to buy in bulk can make it easier to stay healthy when there is little money.

It is helpful to buy items when on sale and in bulk generally, where possible. Some useful groceries are frequently sold cheaply, such as sacks of rice, apples and potatoes. Stockpiling items which are in common use at home makes sense and is different to buying items not required, on impulse.

Some money should always be spent on things which can keep everyone happy but do not cost much, for example herbs and spices, as living on a low income is bad for motivation and can be devastating. Often, spices last for years and can be bought at good prices. Buying necessities in bulk leaves more money for luxuries.

Many shops offer particularly good value for items and these shops can be explored. For example, oriental (e.g. Chinese) grocery stores frequently have cheap rice, lentils, beans, nuts, seeds, herbs and spices. When shopping there for the first time, it is worth browsing in the store to look at the range of items sold.

Sometimes recipes can be chosen to incorporate them. Other ethnic stores, such as Greek, Italian or Middle Eastern, will also have a range of bargain groceries. Even if only to smell the wonderful aromas of spices and coffee alone (yes, I don't usually drink coffee but like the smell), it can be worth visiting these stores. Once one has benefitted in this way at specific shops, it is kind to spread the word to other people who are struggling on a low budget. The shopkeepers would also benefit too.

Regular exercise

Planned exercise is part of the triangle of health and beauty. This was introduced earlier as a mnemonic to remember the three main practices which I think can help many people attain better health and keep it. Of course, at the same time health is promoted, it is easier to look more beautiful in my opinion. Exercise tones muscles covering bones, which give the bodies of men and women attractive forms. It can clearly be seen that beautiful classical sculptures and paintings of men and women show a good understanding of the anatomy of human skeletal muscles. For example, strengthening the pectoralis major and minor muscles with weight training gives more bulk to the male chest and improves support of female breasts, potentially reducing or preventing some sagging (more common with age). As written earlier in the section on weight loss, much effort is needed to bulk-up and this should not happen suddenly without warning and is no reason for worry, if training with weights at a gym. Exercise also keeps the bones of the skeleton supporting the muscles strong. In addition, good blood circulation due to exercise helps keep the skin healthy and can add colour (a "healthy glow").

Better health also fosters a longer life as well as beauty.

In my case, I did not suddenly wish to be healthier or more beautiful and following this decide to exercise. In fact, each time I increased the amount of routine exercise I did (doing this twice in my adult life), it was the result of firstly poor health and later a health scare. It is quite possible that many other people exercise more under threat of a health problem. However, one does not have to wait for this to happen, if it ever does. One can just decide to exercise more because it is healthy.

My scientific training has prepared me for much of the basic science involving exercise. However, I have never received a formal training in exercise science. Nowadays it is a major field of research. Although I could avoid mentioning some major details in this book because of this reason, I think it would not be responsible to do this. Exercise can be dangerous for certain people, just as it can increase the health of many people. Thus, there are some precautions to take in order to exercise safely and they are covered in this section.

If a person has certain medical conditions, such as particular heart problems or might be likely to have a stroke, then exercising without medical advice can lead to death or hospitalisation. Most of these problems should be able to be diagnosed and many would still allow exercise, if medical advice is followed. For example, a person may have blocked coronary arteries. These are the arteries which supply the heart itself with blood, giving it biochemical fuel and oxygen in order to keep it pumping. The coronary arteries can be blocked by the accumulation of fatty deposits, “plaques” leading to narrowing of the arteries (atherosclerosis). A person may not realise he or she has this condition but when exercising, heart pain (angina) might result because of greater demand for performance without enough biochemical fuel and oxygen, due to the narrow arteries. Therefore, before starting an exercise programme, it is best to have a check-up with a local medical doctor (general practitioner - “GP”) if it has been a long time since the last check-up. Apparently, males are more reluctant than females to see medical doctors. If the doctor advises it, or there are other reasons (such as hereditary problems in the family), then it can be good to follow up this visit with one to a specialist (such as a heart specialist, cardiologist). In being cleared of any obvious health problems making exercise risky, one can start exercising with confidence and peace of mind.

When exercising, should there be any pain or unusual feelings, then it is good to stop immediately. Gym fitness equipment often has a safety button to stop movement, such as on a treadmill. However, other forms of exercise might not allow one to stop in this way. Unusual feelings could be pain in the chest, neck, left shoulder or arm, a squeezing or crushing sensation, extreme sweating with little exertion, shortness of breath, dizziness or feeling like fainting. Regardless of what unusual feelings could be experienced, it could be a warning sign to stop and have it checked out. Quite possibly, it could be a false alarm. A torn muscle attached to a rib might make one feel pain in the chest when moving, for example, yet be quite harmless. With most people, there should be nothing to fear and no unusual sensations, except perhaps aching muscles the following day! However, it is always best to be safe than sorry.

When starting to exercise, or increasing exercise, many people may offer goodnatured suggestions or comments. They may be discouraging, such as saying why one should bother exercising. Alternatively, other people may recommend forms of exercise which are not appealing. If suggestions are pleasing, then follow them. Someone may have had experience with the same form of exercise. Anyway, one must like the form of exercise chosen. It really does not matter so much what type of exercise it is, as long as one is motivated to keep doing it. Then it becomes part of one’s lifestyle, hence a lifestyle choice. Furthermore, if the result of exercise is obviously a more beautiful appearance or better figure, then there can be jealousy.



If so, then it is not a reason to stop exercising either. Therefore, positive interactions with people are good but negatives can be respectfully disregarded (hopefully with respect, anyway).

Body mass index (BMI)

An equation which is useful to determine the extent an adult is overweight, is the body mass index (BMI).^{30,32} Although this book focuses on adults, it is possible to use BMI with children. However, if they are thin to normal rather than overweight or obese, it is best to use the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (USA) (CDC) Growth Charts.^{33,34} The BMI equation does not need skill or equipment to use (such as skinfold callipers to measure skinfold thickness), other than a calculator, so it is presented in this book.

$$\text{Body Mass Index (BMI)} = \frac{\text{Weight (in kilograms [kg])}}{\text{Height (in metres [m])}^2}$$

Hence, a hypothetical person weighing 100 kg who is 2 metres (6 foot, 7 inches) tall, would have a BMI of $100 \div (2 \times 2)$

$$= 100 \div 4$$

$$= 25$$

A BMI of 25 or higher is overweight and 30 or more is termed “obese”, along with even greater health risks. Although BMI gives no absolute proof of being overweight or obese (for it can be at the borderline), it is a good guide. If a person has a BMI of 25 or higher and at the next level at least 30, the importance of seeing a medical doctor before starting an exercise programme is increased due to greater risk of heart disease and stroke. If a person with heart disease or having a high risk of stroke suddenly starts exercising without medical advice, especially if the exercise is vigorous, it could cause death. BMI also provides one means of assessing weight loss during a programme of regular exercise. If a person has a BMI under 25, then technically he or she may not be considered overweight! However, weight loss goals are personal and one should be guided by feedback from well-meaning people, such as gym staff. After all, if one wishes to be more beautiful and have a more attractive figure, then one wants to be noticed in a positive way. It is nice if people can say, “Wow, you look great! What are you doing?” BMI can help in this quest.

Gaining fitness versus losing weight

In the section with tips on weight loss, it was stated that this results if less energy is taken in than is lost by means such as exercise. In fact, even “doing nothing” (such as sitting, resting or sleeping) causes calories to be lost. However, usually this is not enough to keep a person looking slim. Whether exercising to increase fitness or to lose weight, more calories are removed when the body uses stored biochemical energy to move. As effort and some straining are involved in exercising, people wish to know how much effort to make to get fit or lose weight.

A number of ways to determine effort in exercise are available. In my opinion, a very convenient way is the Karvonen formula which can often be found in exercise physiology textbooks and in gyms.^{35,36}

Karvonen formula: Maximum Heart Rate (beats per minute) = 220 - Age

After the age of 10 years one can use the formula to firstly calculate maximum heart rate. Thus, a person aged 20 would have a maximum heart rate of 200 upon full exertion. Such exercise is exhausting, so to increase fitness or lose weight a percentage of the maximum heart rate can be sustained for a period of time.

Of course, to use the Karvonen formula, heart rate must be measured when exercising. To check the pulse³⁷ when at rest (such as when sitting), this is easily done by lightly placing the tips of the index (“pointing”) finger and middle finger on the groove just below the inside of the wrist (thumb side). One may need to move the fingertips around slightly or change the pressure applied. The thumb has its own pulse, so is not used for checking the pulse. When exercising, this pulse at the wrist can be hard to find, so lightly place the same two fingertips on the groove at the front of the neck next to the throat. It is best not to press too hard or on both sides of the neck because it can block blood supply to the head enough to faint. If exercise is vigorous, checking the heart rate is easily done by placing the flat of one hand on the chest and feeling the heart pound! Calculating heart rate in beats per minute can conveniently be done by counting for 15 seconds on a clock and multiplying by four, or if this is difficult just by counting for a full minute.

The exercise target heart rate will vary depending on age (using the Karvonen formula) and percentage intensity, depending on the purpose to exercise. According to the American Heart Association, this is 50-85% of the maximum heart rate.³⁸ A higher target heart rate (e.g. 85%) is excellent for fitness but is difficult to sustain and lower heart rates can be sustained for longer, so might be better for burning more calories. To lose weight, 50% is probably too low and 65% might be better, perhaps training 30-90 minutes each time, 3-5 times per week. When training for fitness beware of chatting with people who are not exercising (if just standing next to a treadmill, cross trainer or an exercise bicycle). It is harder to talk when heart rates are high enough for a fitness work-out. If someone is also training, then he or she will feel the same way but a person standing there is not aware of the extra effort required to talk and one can slow down to put in too little effort. Best make every session count.

As a person increases in fitness, the same amount of movement (such as jogging speed) results in a slower heart rate; hence, the usefulness of the Karvonen formula to assess how hard to train. After training regularly, a plateau is reached where one cannot easily move faster to increase heart rate. Thereafter, fitness can simply be maintained.

An advantage of training methodically as I have described, is that one can save time to stay very fit. It takes much longer to improve fitness by low intensity exercise alone, such as walking, albeit if this is enjoyable or clears the mind of any negativity. I improved my fitness greatly by training three times per week for 20 minutes, with two to three minutes to cool down each time.³⁹ If I had known how to improve my fitness this way as a child who hated jogging around grassy ovals during physical education classes, I could have improved my fitness and probably enjoyed more sports than I did. Then again, I might have spent less time in the library reading books, a worthwhile activity that stimulated my desire to learn.



Rather than following the rough suggestions here, it is better to have a proper programme based on exercise goals provided at a local gym after an assessment there. My suggestions have been given for the benefit of people desperate to be fit or lose weight with little money, who might not seek a proper exercise programme.

Tips to save time for exercise and other healthy activities

Exercising, cooking and other healthy activities take time. Busy careers, relationships and family commitments, can compete with time to stay fit and healthy. None-the-less, they can all be part of a full and satisfying life. For optimum health and fitness and indirectly to promote an attractive appearance, it is good to be efficient and find ways to save time. In my opinion, efficiency improves with experience, as do study skills.

However, some major ways to save time are given here in this book, as starting points to help people concerned to find ways to stay healthy.

Often, time management is linked to lifestyle choice. If a demanding career is chosen, there may be no time for much else, except eating out and sleeping (often too little). As mentioned in the chapter on careers, this is something which needs to be considered carefully. After a person is worn out and unhealthy, an organisation or employer might not be as grateful or thankful as expected. The person may simply be excluded or discharged and replaced by someone else. If this happens at a national level due to the struggle by people to maintain basic living standards, then the costs of public health versus revenue from taxes may limit this. However, an assumption made by the author is that there is some choice involved for most people.

To save time, it is necessary to be conscious of how time is used. Saving time is like saving money. Both money and time are resources to be used for advantage. When aware of time use, one can find ways to do more without additional effort. Regular healthy practices are usually better than those done at random for long periods, in my opinion. Regular healthy practices also create good habits. Watching less television saves a great deal of time, I think. If I watch more than 30 minutes of TV, it is hard for me to stop watching and extract myself from the chair.

To limit TV use, one can watch favourite shows but avoid sitting in front of the TV just to pass time, or to fall asleep at night. Although my knowledge of world events is reduced, I would rather follow the news with 5 minutes of news headlines on the radio while doing something, than by watching TV. The same goes for reading newspapers or advertising mail. If reading is not essential or at least highly entertaining, avoiding it saves time.

E-mail, internet and phone use (mobile and fixed-line at home) take much time out of the day which can be used for healthy practices. Rather than talking for hours over the phone, one can quickly arrange a meeting with a friend for a more satisfying chat in person. When busy, social engagements and business meetings can be held over lunch or dinner, given that one could just as well eat a meal alone and meet separately. Quite often, people with busy careers may not eat regularly (or even go to the toilet often enough). One way to eat enough is to pack a lunch at the same time as having breakfast or dinner at home. Pressure is often felt to answer every email immediately. However, it can be more efficient to attend to all e-mails which require answers in a single session, once or twice per day.

Simplifying one's life saves an enormous amount of time. Activities can be examined to determine if they are necessary. Administration of tasks at home requires time. For example, multiple bank accounts take more time to check and administer than just one account. When doing tasks, it is often more efficient to do all similar tasks at once, than at random. Appointments and time for complex tasks can be planned with a calendar, wall chart or organiser, whereas small issues can be dealt with immediately. Thus pay bills when they arrive over the phone or online (if there is money to pay), rather than in person by queuing at the post office. Perhaps, get used to writing lists ("to do" or for shopping), terrible as it may seem. I carry a shopping list in my wallet and a pen almost everywhere I go. If I suddenly remember something, I add to it immediately. If I go to the shops, I cannot forget my shopping list because I already have it.

Buying in bulk, as mentioned in the section on shopping on a low budget, saves both time and money. If buying bread at two loaves for the price of one, then one can freeze the extra loaf at home because it keeps for a long time when frozen. A kilogram of powdered milk goes a long way and means avoiding shopping frequently for fresh milk (although not all people might like the flavour).

Of course, by doing such things one can have an excuse to get out of the house if one has no job, lots of time and little to do. None-the-less, even though I may appear to be organised, sometimes I still go to the fridge and forget why I went there!

By doing all these things, one does not need to keep busy all the time, track is not lost of small issues and neither do they become major problems through inattention. In any case, it is easier to deal with small problems immediately when fresh in one's mind, than when one has to recall all the details about them. Many other areas in life follow similar principles.

One over-riding principle is to do things well ahead of deadlines, breaking them down into manageable tasks. One should alert oneself to deadlines in advance using a calendar, wall chart or organiser. During my time as a university lecturer, I would often sympathise with the suffering which deadlines caused students, each frequently met only days in advance. To meet a deadline, students may often work throughout the night. Although it is simple to write these things, I am not an expert and recognise that motivation to do this is often the problem. However, good health and attractiveness are motivating, in my opinion. This is especially so, if one has experienced poor health or sickness but I think that is not necessary to find motivation. As just discussed, simply by being aware of time use, one can find ways to do more without increasing effort. When in doubt, perhaps ask others who are efficient and successful. They are often willing to share their ways of being efficient. Saving time and meeting deadlines is often due to method rather than being as magical as it might appear.

One area worth discussing is disaster control. Needing to deal with crises can waste a great deal of time, yet many disasters are preventable. Plan well ahead, in order to do things well the first time. If done in a hurry and also poorly, then tasks either need to be redone later, or unresolved issues can cause a disaster. If the problems are complex (the sort that can fill the heart with sorrow or make one clench the teeth), then seek advice before acting. It may be necessary to pay for good advice but problems can be even more costly. At all times, keeping good records and important receipts can save time and avoids problems. Nowadays, when many records are electronic, make multiple back-ups of computer files. Copying files in bulk to USB or external drives, or uploading them to "the cloud" via the internet can be a good way to avoid a disaster.



Avoid the temptation to back-up just only in five minutes, or first thing next morning, rather than immediately. By taking steps to control major problems and crises and safeguarding work already done, large amounts of time and money can be saved.

Activities which are healthy can be related to the time available. Sometimes one has to compromise. Although one may like a certain sport or form of exercise, it can be impractical. For example, I learnt to surf a year ago but it is difficult to do this regularly because I live 20-30 minutes drive from the beach. If people need to travel frequently on business and stay in hotels, it can be practical to pack a skipping rope for regular exercise. For many people, cycling to and from work can be the only practical way to exercise because of busy career and family lives. Many workplaces encourage cycling, it can be a way to beat peak hour traffic and there are good cycle-paths in many cities. Yet this is something that would make me nervous after my experiences on the road as a taxi driver.

I would not trust drivers sufficiently to feel comfortable cycling in traffic. For me this is a personal choice, whereas the risks are really quite low with safe equipment (visible clothing, light(s), reflectors, bell and helmet) and due attention and care on the roads. While driving a taxi at night, I was occasionally astonished to see cyclists wearing dark clothing (no helmets) on bicycles with no lights or reflectors, suddenly appearing in front of the taxi.

The night and early hours of the morning can give rise to strange scenes. Anyway, care about the type of exercise chosen can mean efficient use of time, with greater opportunities to stay healthy and enjoy life.

Positive thinking and personality

On top of the triangle of health and beauty mnemonic is: “Positive mental attitude, sense of purpose and meaning in life”. The reason I have placed it on the top is that attention directs the course of one’s life and positive thinking helps a person to lead his or her life well. Additionally, to see the best in everything and patterns behind life itself helps one feel happier and this can be visible to others. Therefore, positive thinking is also a major aspect of beauty. A number of benefits of a positive attitude and ways of cultivating it will be discussed by me in the chapters on mental health and spiritual matters. Stress is a major cause of both poor physical and mental health, but a positive attitude can reduce stress. There is a link between positive thinking and freedom from depression and other mental health problems. Likewise, I think that there is an association between spiritual dimensions to life and mental outlook. Therefore, by placing positive thinking at the top of health practices, major areas of life can be linked in a way that makes a person feel more beautiful on the inside and also be visibly more beautiful on the outside.

At this point of the book, some readers may hate me. Some people may say that it is too difficult to think positively because life can be so awful. In this case, they could agree that positive thinking is worth it but cannot easily be done. Others may be able to think positively without too much trouble. However, they may say it is naïve; the author is mad because he does not understand reality. Maybe they could say, “Just wait till you find out and experience it for yourself! Then you’ll think just like me.” Thus to be faithful to how things really are prevents one from being deceived and suffering the consequences like an innocent person, wrongfully tormented. Many people have suffered horrible things in life and could quite honestly say that I can have no idea what things were like for them. In fact, I think that everyone suffers in some way.

In other words, every adult could say that he or she knows what suffering is because he or she has experienced it at some point, hopefully not too often. Imagine me here cowering in front of many angry readers who might like to make me suffer for my ignorant writing. In fact, I am only trying to help fellow gay people and others be happier and healthier. No doubt everyone can recognise that being able to think positively under most, if not all, circumstances is a form of power. There are enough problems in life, without weakening oneself and adding the problem of powerlessness. It may seem to be difficult to have a positive attitude but it can be achieved slowly, I think. Books on positive thinking are full of examples of people who had terrible problems but still managed to see the bright side of things.

When discussing my aims in writing this book with a taxi passenger, he remarked that confidence made people more beautiful. When I thought about it, I realised that I had heard similar things before. Sometimes I draw people to myself because I am happy and cheerful. People seem to like to be surrounded by others who are happy because they make themselves feel good. May I add that I like humour, including that which can be morbid. Indeed, I find that seeing the funny side of awful things helps me cope, even if it seems irreverent. Humour makes people feel good and I find that people seem to like the company of people with a sense of humour. Beauty is on the inside too but I do not think it can be hidden there. It radiates outwards, so that other people can see it. Thus by cultivating a positive mental attitude and happiness, others are attracted, even if for no other reason than that one can see purpose and meaning throughout the universe.

As with positive thinking, personality is a factor in attractiveness. Everyone has a unique character, which can make others want to know more about them, hence personality. To be considered beautiful, one should reveal one's personality. If one does not, others cannot notice one's unique and special qualities. In order to do this, a person has to be prepared to participate in a conversation.

Shyness can hinder this, as can lack of interests or a dislike of listening to others or thinking about things. With practice, one can overcome these hindrances. I used to be fairly reluctant to talk to others and somewhat shy but am not now. If approaching others or communicating seems difficult, then one can always listen. Most other people like to talk about themselves and by letting them do so and thinking about what they have to say, one can gradually participate in a conversation, even if not skilled in doing this. Thinking about things may not be motivating but one can cultivate interests. The interests of other people can be infectious. Thus if someone is very excited or enthusiastic about a certain area, it can be inspiring and one may wish to know more and ask questions. This helps to keep conversations going. If a conversation is dead, just by waiting during an awkward silence, the other person would normally speak and even change the topic. Therefore, for shy people or those lacking in conversational skills, revealing their natural personality can just be a matter of practice and patience, adding this form of attractiveness to any others. Participating in conversations is a matter of curiosity and enthusiasm, rather than intelligence. One does not even have to be good at learning, although one can learn a great deal by listening to others, even about what experiences feel like that one has never had. Reading books is another good way to learn (even with only a basic education) and one can read while on the train or waiting for appointments. If in doubt, speak to an educated person or someone whose knowledge one admires and ask which books are good on a particular topic. Clones are not inherently attractive (maybe unless you are a scientist). When one person finds the personality of another attractive, he or she will look for other things to like about that person.



Beauty and fashion

People who know me well are aware that at heart I am an extremely unfashionable person. In fact, I am also a very simple person inside with simple tastes. For much of my life, I have been what is termed a “nerd”. Furthermore, because of my almost obsessive interests in technology and science in general (at least what it can do for humanity), I can also be labelled a “geek”. Although I am quite sociable, much of this has been learned. In my past I was not naturally sociable; hence, perhaps the appropriateness of the “nerd” label. Furthermore, within me is a distinct solitary streak, which finds expression in scientific research or mysticism (I like meditation). Therefore, you can imagine the challenge it is for me to write about how to look beautiful through clothing.

However, wearing flattering clothes helps a person look beautiful. In addition, when considering any attractive clothing, fashion is an issue. Certain looks are “in” or “out”, so may be fashionable or unfashionable. Trying to look beautiful through fashion can be expensive because one needs to get new clothing frequently and brands may be very costly. Additionally, by relying on looking fashionable, one can attract people who are more interested in one’s money than one’s company. This is risky because one wants to know who one’s real friends really are, without waiting for poverty or another misfortune to find out. It can also cause disappointment. One may be noticed due to the wearing of fashionable clothes but if one cannot hold a conversation or has a body which is obviously unhealthy or unfit, people may be turned away. Therefore, as with most things, it is best to have a coordinated approach and also try to be healthy and naturally attractive. Appealing clothing is part of this, even if it is not expensive.

A friend of mine encouraged me to wear trendy clothes when dating. Indeed, after doing this I was astonished at how much more attention I had when going out. In fact, I did not have to spend too much money on my new wardrobe! After Christmas, or perhaps other festive occasions elsewhere in the world when people traditionally give gifts, it is easy to find sales where clothing is sold cheaply. This is the time attractive clothing is not in high demand anymore. It is also possible to find bargains at second-hand clothing shops. While it might not feel good to be buying used clothing, clothes can be washed and it does not have to feel like sharing a toothbrush with a stranger.

Therefore, one can select an appealing style of clothing and not pay too much for it.

Clothing looks best if it matches the wearer. Thus, what suits one person will not suit another. Friends of mine, who like fashion, mostly seem to view it as a means of selfexpression rather than just conformity (like wearing a uniform). The practical side of this is that one can attract others who have a similar style or taste in clothes; hence, expressing themselves in the same fashion (pardon the pun). In my opinion, it is worthwhile to consider which people may find a particular look appealing, when choosing clothes to wear.

Some styles of clothing may be more visibly noticeable than others. For example, bright and/or contrasting colours are easily seen. This is good if one wishes to be noticed. Indeed, I think that a goal of many fashions which might look odd to me is just to get a “foot in the door” with someone else whom a person likes. An example of contrasting colours would be black and white stripes. In my opinion, horizontal stripes make a person appear wider and vertical strips make a person seem taller (maybe even slimmer). Regardless of what I think, or what other people may say, hold the clothes up to you, look in the mirror and think critically.

Surprisingly, you may find that it makes a difference. It is good to be able to form an opinion on clothing, even if it may take some practice, rather than just wearing or buying anything. It is important to find your own style(s), if you have not done this already.

Some articles of clothing and styles never seem to go out of fashion. It is harder to give examples of clothing for women than men because women's clothing seems to be more subject to fashion. For casual wear, jeans and a plain T-shirt seem timeless. Blue jeans, black pants, white T shirts, sneakers and black "business" shoes also seem to have been commonly worn over the years. Similarly, a suit with a collared shirt and tie have been standard formal wear for a long time. If one has a low budget, then selecting extremes and very specific patterns or styles deliberately can be a problem. For example, when buying ties, if they are very thin or very wide, then they may quickly go out of fashion. However, ties are articles of clothing which are easy to store and keep, so both one thin and one wide tie can be kept in a drawer for many years.

Much to my amusement, various articles of clothing from grandparents and other relatives have become fashionable again. Indeed, I wore a suit from my uncle made in the 1930s about 70 years before a job interview I had. Although I was unsuccessful for the job, the interviewer admired my suit, commenting that it looked very fashionable. Thus to save money, one can go for the classic and timeless look.

Personalised beauty care, posture and grooming

This is the last section of the chapter on how to look good on a low budget. Major factors in looking good have been discussed, even if most has been from a personal point of view. Of course, I understand that many readers may have a different viewpoint. If so, please just look at me as a "nerd". There are still some lesser points worth discussing.

There are many personal things which I do, such as avoiding iced or cold drinks and drinking fluids slowly when thirsty, rather than guzzling (learnt from my experience with Asian culture). Therefore, I do not think it my place to bother readers with lots of health and beauty tips that may really apply to me only or could seem trivial. There are also certain brands which I prefer, even if for no apparent logical reason. It would be unfair favouritism to promote these, although the reader may remember that I suggested a vegetarian cookbook. In this case, I thought it was justified. However, I think that a young person should be eager to accumulate a wealth of personal habits contributing to health and beauty.

In most cases, these would be unique to individual needs and preferences. For older readers, this goes without saying because they are likely to have had longer to do this, as in my case.

Posture contributes to beauty. People notice if a person carries himself or herself well or stands upright (even if not tall, like myself). The ability to dance well to music, thus moving attractively, is something people notice. I like to dance to music and am often surprised at how much attention one can get by dancing. In my opinion, good posture and the ability to move well are by-products of health and exercise. These topics have already been covered. Some practices seem to be very good at promoting good posture, such as yoga and Tai Chi. Since doing Tai Chi almost daily for 16 years (mainly because I liked it), I have found that my posture has improved.



Even without doing these practices or specific exercises (such as for rounded shoulders), one can simply be mindful of sitting without rounded shoulders or slouching and walking tall with the head upright. This is good for the health of muscles, tendons, ligaments and joints and contributes to an attractive appearance.

Grooming, or habits contributing to a tidy and clean appearance, is being discussed last because the need for good grooming seems obvious to most people. However, if a person feels insecure, inferior or unhappy, then grooming may be neglected. In such cases it is good to remember that it can be noticed. Thus it is important to wash the body and hair regularly, brush teeth, clip the nails of fingers and toes (but not pick one's nose!) Brushing hair can mean that one needs to shampoo hair less often and it can still look shiny and attractive. Bodily health can possibly be reflected in the appearance of hair, in many cases. Most shampoo seems too strong and degreasing, requiring less of it and less frequent washing. Clothes should be clean, so sweaty socks should not be left to get stiff enough to stand up by themselves in a corner!

Good grooming may go unnoticed but when it is poor, it can be visible. Yet if others consider it too rude to comment, then a person would not know. Body odour is an obvious example. Although I washed daily and wore fresh shirts, I did not know that others could smell my body odour until it was drawn to my attention (how embarrassing!) From then on I used a deodorant regularly. People with a good sense of smell can perceive both fragrance and body odour together, thus an unwashed person cannot always mask the smell. The same goes for dirty fingernails or dirt on other parts of the body, such as the ears. Although this is probably funny for some readers and feels silly for me to be writing, albeit borne out of experience, I hope this is helpful to some people who might otherwise not be aware of it and would like to impress others when dating or just going out.

Chapter 9 : Drugs, including alcohol and the genetic lottery

When going to pubs and night-clubs to meet other people, one may commonly be exposed to alcohol, cigarettes (tobacco) and potentially other drugs. Therefore, it seemed to be practical to include a chapter in this book on drugs, including alcohol because it is often not thought of as a drug. Many people may regard drinking alcoholic beverages totally unlike use of any drug. As I had written in other chapters of this book, introductions from work colleagues and friends make dating easier but gay people may not often have such introductions; hence the need to consider other means of dating and consequent risks of drug exposure at public places of entertainment.

Alcohol and drugs need not be threatening or frightening, even if one has only infrequently thought about them. Any substance which can affect the body or mind can be considered to be a drug. Hence, food can have drug-like effects. Parts of natural plants have well known drug-like effects, such as marijuana and the opium poppy. Not all parts of plants have potent effects. For example, opium poppy seeds do not affect the mind and can be harmlessly eaten in cakes and bread. Due to advanced chemistry and manufacturing methods of modern times, drugs may generally be thought of as concentrated substances, such as in pills. Yet all chemicals (including those in ordinary foods) can be harmful in a sufficient amount. The converse is also true, that all chemicals are harmless if the amount is small enough, although it is dangerous to experiment! Nevertheless, the concept is useful because it means that drugs can be used within a “therapeutic window” (at the right dose). A more commonly used term for drug safety versus effectiveness is “therapeutic index”. Furthermore, a drug used for a medical problem may be good for one person but not another. One drug may shift a property of the body up, another may shift it downwards. Of course, the use of drugs for recreation is the focus of this chapter but the same principles apply.

In other chapters, coverage of aspects of drugs and their use is as appropriate. Hence, the reason to discuss them further in this chapter is to fill in missing gaps. In the following chapter (“medical and bodily health issues and alternative medicine”), issues related to smoking (of tobacco) and drinking of alcoholic beverages will be discussed in some depth. Therefore, any person who wishes to read more about these topics than is covered in this chapter can read more in the next one. Indeed, I would recommend this if a person has a smoking or drinking problem because some practical suggestions for overcoming these problems are given in that chapter. The reader should understand that my preference for no use of alcohol (or any “recreational” drug) when driving is due to my experiences while driving a taxi. On night-shifts, especially in the rain, I would occasionally see wrecked cars after a crash. These were not always between two vehicles but sometimes a tree, barrier or traffic light.

The previous chapter concerned with HIV also covered use of alcohol or other recreational drugs as a risk factor in HIV infection. This depends on the individual and the extent to which he or she is affected by alcohol or drugs. Individuals should consider their own likelihood for problems. Of course, using injectable drugs carries a major risk of HIV infection if needles or syringes are shared between users, discussed in the previous chapter. Attempts have been made to keep chapters relevant to themes.



Brain science as background to understanding recreational drug actions

In the section on intimacy in a previous chapter, the science of brain function was considered to show the overall similarities of male and female sexual responses. This was in the context of the mesolimbic pathway in the brain for experiencing reward.

Major concepts were introduced, which will be extended here because an understanding of recreational drug effects and problems needs such explanations, to demystify the whole area. There is no magic here.

The organs of the body function in systems and any anatomy and physiology textbook discusses this in detail.⁶ In the nervous system, the brain has nerve cells called “neurons”. These cells can be very long (useful to communicate between the brain and elsewhere in the body) and are capable of making many links to other neurons (in the same way as small components of electronic chips in a computer). Along their length, messages are transmitted both electrically and chemically. A compound is made up of charged ions, such as “table” salt (sodium [Na] chloride [Cl] or “NaCl”) that is made up of positive sodium (Na^+) and negative chloride (Cl^-) ions. Flow of certain ions (including sodium and chloride) in and out of pores (channels) along neurons is regulated and allows messages to be transmitted along neurons in pathways like wires joining parts of a circuit board. When messages reach the end of one neuron, they can only continue if a chemical (neurotransmitter) is released at the end.

The next neuron in line has receptors for neurotransmitters. In the section of the previous chapter concerning HIV called “a virus needs a target”, the common biological concept of the lock and key was introduced. There are a number of neurotransmitters and each has its own receptor. Just like a lock and key, a receptor for a neurotransmitter (“lock”) will not respond without the presence of the correct neurotransmitter (“key”). Neurotransmitters are excitatory (stimulating) and inhibitory. The next neuron in line will only send a message if the balance of neurotransmitters present at its receptors is excitatory. Nervous transmission is like the function of computer electronics using binary mathematics (ones and zeros). There is no partial transmission. Nerve cells either transmit or do not, within the nervous system.

Individual neurotransmitters are common to different circuits of the brain which connect different brain regions.^{5,40} This concept is important to understanding recreational drug effects and symptoms of disorders of mental health. Different circuits within the brain often but not always connect the same brain regions.

Each region of the brain is associated with certain function(s), although the brain can “rewire” itself (like growth and repair) if it has been damaged (such as by a stroke) and functions are redistributed to some extent.

The different neurotransmitters are produced in individual brain regions by neurons which project to other brain regions in a given circuit. Hence, the neurotransmitter dopamine is used in the mesolimbic pathway to reward an individual after performing various activities, such as achieving, exercising, having sex, eating and drinking. This brings pleasure and this is motivating. Dopamine is produced by neurons in the so-called “ventral tegmental area (VTA)” which project to regions including the nucleus accumbens, releasing the dopamine there, which then gives rise to the experience of pleasure.

The same circuit links other brain regions where dopamine made in the VTA is released, corresponding to different functions than that of the nucleus accumbens. Hence, dopamine is a neurotransmitter important in reward and motivation, thought, attention, movement (when produced in the “substantia nigra” rather than the VTA) and wakefulness (when part of a circuit involving the “thalamus” of the brain).

Circuits with the neurotransmitter norepinephrine (also “noradrenaline”) are important in mood (emotions or feelings), dreaming and wakefulness. Circuits involving the neurotransmitter serotonin are important in mood, sleepiness, perception of sensations (such as vision and sound), appetite and control of body temperature.

In addition, circuits involving the neurotransmitter histamine are important for wakefulness; this is why many anti-histamine medications against allergies (with symptoms like itchiness and a rash) can make people feel sleepy. In the brain, circuits involving the neurotransmitter acetylcholine are important for thought and memory. Elsewhere in the body, acetylcholine is used to control muscle movements and gland secretions. Thus some antidepressants which stimulate serotonin and norepinephrine to boost mood (relieving depression) may give people a dry mouth sensation by blocking acetylcholine and may also cause drowsiness by blocking the neurotransmitter histamine. Drugs normally have unwanted side effects by various mechanisms. The neurotransmitters dopamine, serotonin and norepinephrine belong to the chemical category called monoamines and are all important in mood. Deficiencies of one or combinations of these three neurotransmitters can cause depression according to the monoamine hypothesis of depression.^{5,41}

To understand the effects of recreational drugs, it is also necessary to consider the effects of other neurotransmitters and proteins. Of course, the explanations in this book are simplified and many components are not included in this description. Gamma aminobutyric acid (GABA) and glycine are inhibitory and glutamate is excitatory. Opioid drugs (opium, heroin, morphine, oxycodone and codeine) mimic neurotransmitters binding to opioid receptors, notably one called mu (Greek letter μ , pronounced “mew”).

In order to prevent excessive amounts of neurotransmitters building-up in the gaps between two neurons, the neurotransmitter may be destroyed using an enzyme (such as monoamine oxidase to destroy serotonin, norepinephrine and dopamine, or acetylcholinesterase to destroy acetylcholine) or the neurotransmitter can be transported back into the end of the neuron using a transporter (for dopamine, serotonin, norepinephrine, glutamate, GABA and glycine). Drugs stimulating a receptor are called “agonists”, whereas those inhibiting or blocking a receptor are called “antagonists”. Drugs may also act at receptors for ions along a neuron, keeping the ion channels open or closed; or by blocking a transporter, which allows more of a particular neurotransmitter to remain in the gap between two neurons and continue to stimulate or inhibit the next neuron.

Drugs may have more or less specific effects. If more specific, this can mean fewer side effects. Drug effects can be specific to one region or throughout the body. Drugs also differ in how long they are active.

This is partly determined by how long they bind to their target receptor or other molecule and how quickly they are removed from the body by the actions of the liver and kidneys. Drug potency, dosage and route of delivery of the drug to the body determine the strength of drug action.



Hence, the strength of drug action is affected by whether a given drug is swallowed, absorbed via the linings of the mouth or nose, inhaled via smoke or injected into a vein. To understand recreational drug actions, as well as medical drug treatment of mental health disorders discussed in a chapter later in this book, all the factors discussed in this whole section need to be considered. Indeed, this basic science background information should help to understand the main mechanisms of recreational drug actions and their side effects in other texts, should a reader be sufficiently concerned to find out about them.

Reasons people may use recreational drugs related to their medicinal properties

Recreational drugs can have medical uses apart from being used by people for entertainment or due to an addiction. Indeed prescription drugs are a category of recreational drugs, when used for reasons other than as may be recommended by a medical doctor prescribing them.

Use of prescription drugs for recreational purposes, especially opiate drugs which can be prescribed for pain relief (as analgesics) has increased greatly.^{42,43} Indeed, most people who used prescription drugs for recreational purposes appeared not to get them from a medical doctor with a prescription! Possibly, many of these people obtained the medicines from a relative or friend. Although people may assume that they are safer than other recreational drugs because they are medicines and “prescribed” for someone (if not themselves), they can be particularly dangerous. Opioid drugs are especially addictive and capable of causing death in overdose by suppressing breathing. None-the-less, opioid drugs are especially effective pain relievers and a major last resort in the treatment of severe pain. Apparently only a small percentage of people using them for pain by prescription appear to become addicted compared with people using them recreationally.

Marijuana is a commonly used recreational drug,^{43,44} in fact surpassing use of prescription drugs for recreational purposes by young people. However, marijuana and its derivatives (including “psychoactive” ones which affect the mind) have a number of genuine medical applications; including treatment of loss of weight, nausea and for pain relief in AIDS and cancer patients. It is legal for medical use in certain states and countries as “medical marijuana”. In fact, the extent to which it can be used for pain relief surprised me, only being revealed to me after I checked the scientific literature. People like me could think that such medical use of marijuana is a closely guarded secret! Of course, it could be simpler to go to a pharmacy to buy standard pain relief medication in many less severe cases, without having mood alteration or other side effects, or having to avoid driving due to slowed-down reflexes (increased risk of accidents).

Although amphetamine (“speed”) and methamphetamine (“meth” or “ice”) are dangerous drugs, readily able to cause addiction, psychosis and induce violence, they are used as medicines.^{43,45} They are prescribed in low doses for attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) (mainly treated in children) and also have uses in treating the sudden-onset sleep disorder narcolepsy and obesity. Amphetamine drugs prescribed for medical purposes appear to be used recreationally in a minority of cases. Even if this is a concern, when ADHD diagnosis is correct (apparently this can be difficult) amphetamine drugs are very beneficial.

There are other examples, such as the highly addictive drug cocaine, which is a good local anaesthetic.^{5,41} Although used in medicine, when taken recreationally, after a while cocaine use can be associated with increased amounts of unsafe sex and corresponding risk of HIV infection, paranoid symptoms and violence. In considering why people use recreational drugs, it is still important to acknowledge substantial medical applications of many such drugs.

The self-medication hypothesis

At this point some readers could be vexed that I do not display strong opinions either for or against recreational drug use. They may wonder why I do not commit myself. One possibility could be that I am too cowardly to face strong criticism for my views, whether being for or against recreational drug use. The reason I do not commit myself to strong opinions relates to my wish not to judge others and my prior scientific training. My scientific education and research training fostered habits of observing things and actions which occur, then designing experiments and gathering results to arrive at a hypothesis (theory) as to why the observed things or actions occurred in the first place. Recreational drug use can cause a great deal of suffering, yet for many individuals it is a lifestyle choice that appears to give them satisfaction and no obvious serious consequences. Therefore, rather than pass judgement, I wish to understand why people choose to use recreational drugs in the first place.

The first reason for recreational drug use I wish to consider is a medical (hence “selfmedication”). Having just considered medical uses for recreational drugs in the previous section of this chapter, it is relevant to introduce the self-medication hypothesis, which has been used to explain the use of recreational drugs by individuals to treat a potential mental health condition (such as depression) and particular choices of recreational drugs or combinations of them by the same individuals.⁴⁶ Not only are different mental health conditions (depression being only one of them) associated with imbalances of neurotransmitters in circuits of the brain, such imbalances are also brought about by use of different recreational drugs.⁵ However, if the self-medication hypothesis is correct, then neurotransmitter imbalances caused by choices of recreational drugs are really adjustments to restore normal levels of neurotransmitters in the brains of the recreational drug users. The theory would be that individuals would choose different recreational drugs to use by experiencing the drug effects on their emotions. To support this theory it has been observed that recreational drug use is decreased more after treatment with antidepressant medication in individuals with depression than those without it. This suggests that individuals with depression had turned to recreational drugs to selfmedicate and stopped using them when an alternative (prescribed) treatment was available.⁴⁶

Of course there are many more mental health conditions than just depression.^{5,46} Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) is often undiagnosed and untreated in adults. It is characterised by a general inability to pay attention, impulsive behaviour and hyperactivity. ADHD may be associated with smoking of tobacco cigarettes because this boosts dopamine in areas of the brain where it can be lacking in ADHD, such as the prefrontal cortex of the brain responsible for attention and certain other mental functions. Adults with ADHD may also be using alcohol and stimulant drugs such as amphetamines to self-medicate ADHD because these drugs also boost dopamine in areas of the brain where it may be deficient. This may be done unconsciously.



Dopamine function in the brain is also abnormal in schizophrenia, a “psychotic” condition with many symptoms, including inability to pay attention, delusions, hallucinations (voices in the head or visions) and potentially also aggression. People with schizophrenia might self-medicate to calm down symptoms, quite understandably. Of course, symptoms can be variable and so can be the choice of recreational drugs. Smoking of tobacco cigarettes (boosting dopamine) is common in people with schizophrenia, where certain symptoms result from too little dopamine in the prefrontal cortex of the brain. However, too much dopamine in the mesolimbic pathway of the brain can give symptoms of delusions and hallucinations, common to both schizophrenia and frequent recreational use of amphetamines and cocaine.

Depression has a subcategory called “bipolar spectrum disorders”, commonly known as manic depression. However, it is not simply characterised by periods of intense energy, activity and elation followed by depression.

There are differences in the proportions of mania and depression and the intensities of either; hence, the range or spectrum of this bipolar disorder. Certain individuals with a bipolar disorder may self-medicate with recreational drugs, which can have bad effects on mood because of the up-and-downshifts of mood due to the disorder. Alcohol, opiate drugs and smoking tobacco cigarettes (nicotine) can all increase any monoamine neurotransmitters (dopamine, serotonin or norepinephrine) which may be deficient in depression. Alcohol or benzodiazepine drugs (“minor” tranquilisers or sedativehypnotics such as Valium®, Rohypnol® or Xanax®) may be more popular where depression also involves anxiety because they boost the inhibitory neurotransmitter gamma aminobutyric acid (GABA). Of course, the choice of recreational drug(s) used by individuals can depend on any mental health conditions they may have. There could be a number of such conditions at the same time (so-called “comorbidity”).

Therefore, if a correct diagnosis and appropriate treatment for these were available, such individuals might not choose to use recreational drug(s) to selfmedicate. This is only a theory, anyway. Furthermore, this section has only considered medical reasons for using recreational drugs. The intention of presenting the self-medication hypothesis is to help people who wish to avoid recreational drugs to find new ways to do this.

Non-medical reasons people may use recreational drugs

Of course, people who use recreational drugs may have no mental health conditions and even if they do, use of recreational drugs may simply be a personal lifestyle choice. At no point do I wish to imply that people use recreational drugs only because they are mentally ill. At this point, even more readers may wonder if I shall express strong opinions against the use of recreational drugs. Hence, will I get bad criticism from people who use drugs themselves or alternatively from those against this? Indeed, opinions on use of recreational drugs are highly polarised, many seeming to be strongly in favour of use or strongly against it!

My firm conviction is that many people turn to recreational drugs for comfort due to traumatic experiences or emotional problems, even if their mental health is otherwise fine. Should this be the case with anyone reading this book, I hope that he or she would consider alternatives to recreational drugs to address a troubling problem. It is always possible to seek counselling and there are many support organisations which exist to help people with such problems.

Turning to drugs (even prescription drugs from a medical doctor) due to a personal problem would not be related to enjoyment of the drugs themselves and could create even bigger problems. I can fully understand that a person who considers that his or her life is a mess would wish to seek relief from somewhere and may be very isolated with few obvious options.

It appears that involvement with recreational drugs can be dependent on relatives, friends and acquaintances a person may have. I am very much for autonomy, the right to decide something by and for oneself.

This is as important in clinical trials in medical research as it is in one's own life, I think. Using recreational drugs only to please someone else or to keep his or her friendship is not good because then one has not made the choice entirely by oneself. Shortly before I started high school, a lung specialist told me that I must definitely not smoke because I had a lung volume which was below average. Then when I started high school (in the early 1980s) I was determined not to smoke in spite of pressure from a number of my peers to smoke on a number of occasions. Today I am glad that I do not smoke cigarettes because of the expense and the risk to my health. Of course, tobacco cigarettes are not socially acceptable to smoke in public now to the extent that they used to be. Nonetheless, I am hoping that by reading this chapter, people will be helped to make their own choices and maybe even help a friend who may have certain problems with drugs but not know how to cope.

Of course, many people might use recreational drugs because they are curious to try them or already have used them and enjoy their effects, seeking happiness or for whatever other reason. It is not my place to moralise and I do not like doing this anyway. However, there are some useful comments I can make here and I shall try to be brief. If planning to use or already using recreational drugs, or prescription drugs for purposes and in amounts not intended by a medical doctor, please consider obtaining more information about the drugs themselves and their effects. There are now many reliable sources of information from government and private organisations, over the internet and via other means.

Normally drugs have side effects, as previously stated. Some of the side effects may not bother certain users whereas others might, even if they can be sure that the drugs they are using do not contain harmful additives to increase the weight and corresponding purchase price. Users may not be bothered about side effects, regardless of whether or not they can be imprisoned or executed in their home country for possession or use of the drugs! For example, marijuana can induce psychosis (like schizophrenia) in certain people, even if this is rare and requires high doses. It can also potentially cause other mental health conditions in susceptible people.^{5,43} If a person did not know this but did know that they had a number of relatives with a psychosis or that they had a mental health condition themselves, they could be greatly at risk without being aware of it. In addition, any drug used during pregnancy can potentially harm an unborn baby, including alcohol and nicotine from tobacco cigarettes. By informing oneself about drugs, one can make informed choices and help a friend or relative to do this too, considering that a person may already be using or addicted to certain drug(s) and such information could be very useful indeed. Recreational drugs can have potentially beneficial effects and risks, such benefits as in the section on medical uses of recreational drugs earlier in this chapter. Indeed, by knowing the benefits, some users might be able to discover why they are using the drugs in the first place! However, there are always safer ways of getting such benefits.



The genetic lottery and suffering versus enjoyment for purely recreational users of drugs

Some people may use recreational drugs and have a life filled with sorrow, whereas others may wonder what all the fuss is about. It is likely that certain people wish to know why. Increasing evidence is available for genetic influences which determine unique responses to drugs, including those used only for medical treatment rather than for recreation, such as cancer chemotherapy drugs with side effects which include nausea and vomiting but no pleasant effects. Before discussing some of the genetics, I wish to mention variable individual effects.

Unfortunately (for this book), my experience of psychoactive drugs is limited and unremarkable. However, I was recently reading about opium effects and addiction in a book written many years ago, entitled *The Confessions of an English Opium-eater* by Thomas De Quincey.⁴⁷ He wanted to pass on his experiences, good and bad, to remove any misconceptions. The author was known to both now famous English poets,

Samuel Taylor Coleridge and William Wordsworth. In his book the author states that he used opium (orally, ingesting it) for 52 years at the time of writing his book. He died when about 74 years of age. The author used opium regularly for eight years, roughly from the age of 19 years while a student at Oxford University in England, claiming that it hardly had any bad effect on his health during this time.

Initially starting to use opium for severe pain, he continued to use it recreationally. The reason that the author had no problems for so long is probably due to careful attention to the maximum dosage and not having used it daily before he developed an addiction. Again due to pain, he started to take opium daily and the opium still brought him happiness for a time before he experienced “an Iliad of woes”. At least from his descriptions, one can see that a very dangerous drug could be taken for a long time with hardly any ill effects simply because care was taken with the amount and frequency of dosage! On one occasion, the author gave a visitor a gift of enough opium to kill many men, not knowing that the visitor would immediately swallow it all (which the visitor did to the author’s horror). The visitor had seemed to be familiar with opium and the author never heard of his death later, presuming the visitor survived the dose. He also cites use of opium in escalating doses by an old person for gout pain, with absolutely no effect. Anecdotally at least, opium exerted unique effects on different people.

If one assumes that a person may use a recreation drug either out of curiosity, purely for enjoyment, or to seek happiness or another entirely non-medical reason; one could ask why he or she might seem to be fine whereas another would suffer. Without this being my field of research, in my opinion unique genetics of the individual are important.

Ignoring any environmental influences on the brain or addiction, one person may try a particular recreational drug and experience little or no effect, hardly motivating the person to try again. Even if he or she does, then the result might be similarly unremarkable. Another person may have very satisfying effects, prompting him or her to continue using the drug. Even if a person is satisfied with the effect of a recreational drug, addiction may not be a problem for that person but a major problem for someone else.

All of this should be considered against the unique make-up of the brain of each person with personalised interconnections of neurons (for skills, personality, memories and thoughts), function of neurotransmitter circuits, all transformed by unique experiences. Every single protein made in humans is determined by one or more genes, subject to heredity. This includes enzymes making neurotransmitters, their transporters, components of their receptors and enzymes that break down neurotransmitters. Therefore, the effects of drugs on brain function are influenced by genetics with variability much like that of a lottery.

Biochemical changes occur in the body due to long-term stresses. These are different from stresses that occur when under immediate threat, which pass quickly when the threat (or perceived threat) is over. Cocaine activates this long-term stress response in human and rat studies (review available⁴⁸). In addition, biochemical inhibition of this stress response in rats with a genetic preference for alcohol can reduce alcohol preference. Conversely, biochemical activation of this stress response can lead to craving for cocaine in people who are addicted to it. Therefore, genes affecting the long-term stress response can potentially affect addiction to drugs.

In humans and animals, there are genetic variations of the gene (*OPRM1*) for the opiate receptor mu, the main receptor for opiate drugs (review available⁴⁸). One genetic variation more frequently found in people of Asian rather than European or African ethnic background, is more common in people who are addicted to heroin or alcohol (alcoholics). Various genes (including *OPRM1*) are known to influence pharmacological treatment of opiate addiction using the drug methadone, making it easier or more difficult to treat opiate addiction with this drug.

From other human and animal studies, variation in dopamine (D2) receptor levels are associated with addiction to cocaine and may also predispose individuals to it. Dopamine levels in the brain are influenced by circadian (sleep/wake) cycles. Furthermore, the activity of a “clock gene” (*PER2*) (involved in circadian cycles) is controlled by dopamine levels in the brain. Genetic variations of this clock gene were shown to be present in different ethnic groups by authors of one study.⁴⁹ One variation was more common in individuals of non-African ethnic background than in individuals of the African-American ethnic group. Another variation was more common in individuals of the African-American ethnic group.

Statistically significant differences could be seen for the presence of this genetic variation of the clock gene in individuals of the African-American ethnic group who did not use cocaine (“controls”) versus those of the African-American ethnic group who did. The authors of this study concluded that this particular genetic variation in the clock gene can help to make individuals susceptible to cocaine addiction.

When considering why one person may be fine and yet another might suffer due to use of certain drug(s), one should also consider the supply. In cases where parts of plants are used as drugs, the potency is influenced by factors such as the species of plant, where it is grown and what it is mixed with after it is prepared.



Marijuana is an example.⁴⁴ Other drugs, even if pure, may have added substances to increase their weight for purchase. The additives could be other unknown psychoactive drugs, something harmful or harmless. Hence the potency of these drugs can be variable, depending on the supply. Indeed, variability of drug supply can make it difficult to compare medical research on drugs such as marijuana.

The biochemical process leading to drug dependence and addiction

The many biochemical processes of the body are carefully regulated to be in balance, so that people can be healthy. Underactivity is increased and overactivity is decreased much like movement of a seesaw (up or down). Drug effects mimic natural processes and therefore induce regulation after a drug is used. When a particular psychoactive drug no longer produces the same effect, this is known as drug tolerance. This can lead to drug dependence, when a person needs to continue to use the psychoactive drug to feel normal. A person can be said to be addicted if he or she experiences intense craving for the drug after a short time without it. Hence, removal of the drug produces so-called withdrawal symptoms if a person is already addicted to the drug. Withdrawal symptoms can be psychological, with ongoing desire for the drug or continuously thinking about it; or alternatively they can be physical, such as pain and/or other unpleasant physical sensations.

Regulation of the mesolimbic pathway for experiencing reward, involving the neurotransmitter dopamine, occurs just as with other biochemical pathways in the body. The mesolimbic pathway for reward was introduced in the section on intimacy in a previous chapter of this book and background to understanding drug effects on it were provided in the section on brain science earlier in this chapter. Different psychoactive drugs stimulate or inhibit various neurotransmitter receptors or other components of the mesolimbic pathway for reward. The ultimate effect is typically release of dopamine in the nucleus accumbens of the brain, resulting in the experience of pleasure. However, brain circuits involving neurotransmitters other than dopamine can be affected in various ways, resulting in differences in psychoactive drug effects.

Hence, drugs may alter mood, induce changes in perception (such as hallucinations, involving perception of light and sound) and many other effects which can be pleasant, unpleasant or neutral. Of course, this can be influenced by genetics, as can dependence and addiction.

A good example of a process causing drug dependence is nicotine from tobacco cigarettes⁵ because this is a commonly used drug and can be very difficult for many people to discontinue once addicted. The overall effect of nicotine is release of the dopamine neurotransmitter in the nucleus accumbens. However, there are different mechanisms by which nicotine does this. As previously mentioned in the section on brain science earlier, dopamine for release in the nucleus accumbens is made by neurons in the VTA of the brain, receptors of which are stimulated by nicotine. Other neurons in the VTA produce the inhibitory neurotransmitter GABA, which inhibits dopamine-producing neurons in the VTA from releasing dopamine. Another mechanism of action of nicotine from tobacco smoke is to desensitise receptors on the GABA-producing neurons in the VTA, so that they cannot inhibit dopamine release. A typical tobacco cigarette seems to have just enough nicotine to desensitise these receptors in a typical smoker. More would not be needed and less would not desensitise all the receptors and would reduce any enjoyment. Receptor function returns to normal after a certain time, when a smoker will feel the desire for another cigarette. A smoker typically smoking one pack per day, would have enough cigarettes in the pack to keep the receptors desensitised for one day.

The natural response of the body to prolonged desensitisation of these receptors is to increase their number (upregulation). At this point, drug dependence has occurred. Without nicotine, craving is stronger once these receptors have been upregulated. Then to feel normal, a smoker needs to continue to smoke and without doing this a person can notice an addiction.

Accidental recreational drug overdose and potential addiction treatment

The last section in this possibly rather dry chapter will hopefully provide useful suggestions to individuals at risk of overdose or addiction. Individuals reading this book may be exposed to recreational drugs but may have little experience of them. Hopefully this chapter has been helpful for them to make choices about drug use, without potentially losing any friends already using recreational drugs. However, other individuals may already be addicted to drugs, so this section may be useful to them. In many cases, overdose can be too late (death can result).

However, there are issues to consider well before then. Addiction causes great suffering and there are treatment programmes available and some helpful points are provided here.

Overdose can be deliberate or accidental. This distinction is important to think about if it has happened to a friend or relative. Any particular case of overdose might not be accidental. However, self-harm and suicidal intentions are discussed in a later chapter. Here, accidental overdose is being considered. This could even occur with prescription drugs, such as opiates taken for pain relief, if taken in greater doses or more often than advised for the pain. As discussed earlier, drug supply can be variable, whether simply a prepared plant source such as marijuana or a supposedly pure drug. Recreational drugs may have non-psychoactive additives, reducing their potency or include unknown drugs with unpredictable effects. A person using recreational drugs should not assume that a given drug will have a predictable effect. This depends on the source (which can be uncertain) and any drug tolerance in the user. One example is return to opiate use by a person previously tolerant at the previous dosage, after a long time without use of the drug (even many years). Another example is drug source change. A person addicted to an opiate drug may regularly be using the same source which has harmless additives, reducing its potency. This person may then move to another location and obtain a new opiate source, this time being pure (without additives). A pure opiate source is more potent. All drugs have a “therapeutic window”, below which they are ineffective and above which they are toxic. The therapeutic window can be wide or narrow, such as for certain opiates (including heroin). If a person unused to a pure opiate source uses it (for example heroin by injection), harm due to overdose can quickly result.

Opiates cause death by suppressing breathing via inhibition of specific regions in the brain. Certain other recreational drugs or additives can increase this effect. After breathing has stopped, without assistance by first aid resuscitation or delivery of an antidote death can easily occur. Even if a person experiencing an opiate overdose is not alone, others may not know first aid resuscitation or be too frightened of being accused of drug use or murder to call an ambulance. Indeed, anyone who may be in frequent contact with injectable opiate users should carry or keep nearby an opiate drug overdose antidote such as Narcan[®] (naloxone) and be trained to use it. A person giving the antidote must also be prepared for an angry response from the opiate user after he or she regains consciousness! Naloxone competes for binding at the mu opiate receptor, displacing an opiate drug such as heroin and relieving potential harm after an overdose.



It is best if all the possibilities for overdose have been well considered beforehand, should anyone potentially be exposed to psychoactive drugs which can cause accidental death by overdose. Then overall, fewer accidental deaths would result.

Unknown drugs cause problems in cases of overdose by making the correct treatment difficult to determine. As stated earlier, unknown drugs can contaminate the supply of a particular recreational drug. However, even the entire drug itself can be unknown.

An example could be a so-called “date rape” drug, one of the so-called “club drugs” because they can potentially be associated with night-clubs. People going out to pubs and night-clubs should take care to watch their drinks.

While a drink is unattended, any other person could add a drug to it before the person whose drink it is returns. One motive could be to take advantage of the drugged person.

Overdose may be unintentional but can occur if the dose is too high. Should the drug be unknown (any person who knew about the drug may have left), such an overdose can be difficult to treat.

Should addiction to a recreational drug have occurred, there are factors which can increase chances of recovery. Quite possibly, good friends and/or family members would be concerned. However, a person with an addiction may well experience intense cravings for a drug and pain or other unpleasant physical symptoms without the drug. Hence, an addicted individual must be very determined and want to give up use of the particular drug. If a person does not consider that he or she has a problem, then it can be pointless trying to help. However, if a person with an addiction admits to a problem and wants to overcome the addiction, then I think it is best to have help from someone with experience. This could be a trained professional or at least someone who understands the process of recovery from addiction to a particular drug. Then rehabilitation has a much greater chance of success. The person who is addicted will probably have to avoid contact with most of his current friends and acquaintances. Many are likely to be addicts themselves and will try to get the person who wants to recover back onto drug(s). In fact, a big problem with recreational drugs is perhaps less use of the drugs themselves but contact with people selling them. People making a profit from selling drugs may coerce others into parting with money for drugs they did not really want or ask for. The word profit is misleading because it is possible that people selling drugs may not really be making a profit, so much as maintaining their own drug habits, which can be expensive. Hence, no money may be saved by such people. It just goes on drugs. Anyway, a person wishing to recover from an addiction has to break habits and stop patterns which keep him or her dependent on one or more drugs.

Addiction to certain drugs, such as cocaine and heroin, usually means that the user has to spend a great deal of money to keep his or her habit (or suffer withdrawal symptoms). This can have several unpleasant consequences. An addict may borrow a great deal of money from friends or relatives, without paying it back, or even take money from them (quite probably with great regret). He or she may be involved in criminal activity or exchange of sex for money in order to obtain a drug supply. This can lead to homelessness, although homeless people in general are certainly not necessarily addicted to drug(s).

With these pressures, it can be difficult to find the motivation and substantial money for rehabilitation, which can take a long time. Alternatively, a person may be addicted to expensive drugs but also rich, thus not receiving money from friends or family, or engaging in criminal activity to obtain money for drugs. However, addiction is distressing because a person cannot easily stop and even if successful and/or rich there is great suffering.

None-the-less, friends and/or family can still help and be comforting. There are also organisations that support people recovering from drug addiction.

Alcoholics Anonymous⁵⁰ provide support to individuals with an alcohol problem and will also be mentioned in the next chapter concerned with medical and bodily health issues. Narcotics Anonymous are an organisation more specifically devoted to drugs of addiction other than alcohol and they may have a local gay group.⁵¹

Treatment of addiction to many drugs can be assisted by use of medical drugs prescribed specifically to treat addiction. This and the use of nicotine-containing products to help quit smoking of tobacco will be discussed in a section of the medical chapter just mentioned. Although a number of medicines are approved to treat addiction to different drugs, medical doctors may be reluctant to use them,⁵ perhaps preferring to try more familiar options. A further problem with medical help may be reluctance to treat. For example, addiction to stimulant drugs such as methamphetamine, amphetamine and cocaine may require a long time to treat (maybe even years) due to damage to neurons in the brain which produce dopamine.

Of course, this depends on the length of time a person has been addicted. Therefore, psychiatrists may be unwilling to accept such patients. This means that someone who wishes to have assistance for a particular addiction problem may have to keep searching for help and not give up.

There are comments that may be helpful relating to overdose or addiction to specific drugs, relating to matters not covered elsewhere in this book. Trying to be brief, I shall provide them here in case it is helpful to people addicted to the drugs, relatives and/or friends. Only limited information is provided here, of general interest, to avoid lengthy discussions of specific drug effects and problems. Should a reader be exposed to use of any of many recreational drugs, I would strongly suggest seeking information relating to the particular drug(s) to avoid potential harm to him- or herself, friends or relatives.

Alcohol and smoking of tobacco cigarettes is included in the following chapter on medical and bodily health issues because gay and straight people who go to bars, night-clubs and other places of entertainment would be more likely to be exposed to alcohol and tobacco smoking than to other drugs. Therefore, nicotine in tobacco and alcohol both have priority in terms of drugs to be discussed. Marijuana is not included, although it appears to be a relatively commonly used recreational drug, which is typically smoked by people using it.^{43,52} Addiction rates vary from about 10%, to between 25 and 50% (for daily use). Of course, this depends on the amount and frequency of marijuana smoked. It is possible that a person may not know that he or she is addicted until he or she stops using marijuana and notices cravings for it.



One big problem with using marijuana is greatly increased risks of car accidents due to slowed-down reflexes and other effects, if driving when affected. It is also important to mention that a relatively new variety of marijuana, called K2 or “Spice”, can be more addictive and more commonly produce bad side-effects. K2 contains synthetic cannabinoids, often in unknown combinations.

These can have psychoactive effects like the main psychoactive compound in marijuana, delta-9tetrahydrocannabinol (THC). There is an antagonist drug called “rimonabant” which blocks THC binding to CB1 cannabinoid receptors in the brain to treat addiction, which may assist recovery but could potentially increase risk of suicide if used in the long term. However, there are potentially other drug treatments and different psychological approaches involving counselling have been shown to be effective.^{5,52}

One class of drugs worth mentioning are sedative-hypnotics, which include barbiturates. They cause sleep in sufficient doses but can be used recreationally at lower doses, assuming that falling asleep has no entertainment value. Barbiturates are dangerous because the potential for overdose is very unpredictable. Alcohol and benzodiazepines (also sedative-hypnotics but can also be called “minor” tranquilisers), such as Valium®, Rohypnol® or Xanax®, have similar effects at certain GABA receptors of neurons in the VTA of the brain which results in release of dopamine into the nucleus accumbens to experience pleasure.

Alcohol also has additional effects on receptors of the mesolimbic pathway for reward. These different drugs can also act together to increase potency. Hence, individuals may be drunk and take barbiturates with the intention of enjoying themselves but rather than just falling asleep, they may go into a coma or die. In effect this is similar to what I did (taking a large amount of barbiturates with alcohol) when I tried to kill myself on one occasion before I came out properly as a gay man. Of course, I did not die (being here to write)! I give a better explanation, including my thoughts and feelings at the time, in the chapter which covers self-harm (including suicide). Indeed, alcohol can increase the potency of many drugs, psychoactive and non-psychoactive. If in doubt about whether or not it is safe to take a medication with alcohol or when drunk, one can ask a medical doctor. People can take so many medicines that it can be difficult to avoid taking some with alcohol, even if they only drink once per day with a meal. Alcohol itself is dangerous in overdose. Hence, drinking too much alcohol can cause a person to enter a coma and stop breathing. Furthermore, the tongue of the person or any vomited material could block his or her airways. Therefore, if individuals are so drunk that they cannot be roused, they should be observed to ensure that they are still breathing. If someone stops breathing, it is possible to call an ambulance and then also try to resuscitate them (if someone knows first aid). Barbiturates cause drug tolerance more easily than benzodiazepines and drug withdrawal can be more dangerous.⁵

Conclusion

Now it is the end of this chapter and I have not really committed myself to writing whether or not I approve of recreational drug use. Some may wonder whether or not I shall escape from the pressure to comment and thus to be on one side of a debate with strong opinions on each side! Maybe unfortunately for some readers at least, I stand for the informed choice of individuals to such an extent that I am reluctant to pass judgement (just as I am disinclined to do with anybody, in any case). Of course, it is safer not to use drugs except as medicines. However, I believe that one person should always try to help or counsel another without judging the individual. In this chapter, I am trying to help by providing relevant information. It can cause big problems to make mistakes. However, it is more important to learn from any mistakes than worry about not making them. Indeed, if one can learn from the mistakes of others it is less painful! Decisions in adult life are not always simple or obvious. I have done my best to present both good and bad sides of common recreational drugs with as little bias as I can manage. I hope readers will not judge me too harshly for doing this. In my own life, I do not wish to use recreational drugs, being a 46-year-old gay man who is currently single. As I wrote in the chapter called “looking good on a low budget”, the liver and kidneys detoxify molecules and act to remove them. In my opinion, I have the best chance to look as good as I can if I do not use recreational drugs, myself.



Chapter 10 : Medical and bodily health issues and alternative medicine

Unlike the chapter on health and beauty (“looking good on a low budget”), there are aspects of health which are unlikely to affect the overall appearance of the individual. However, health issues which are not involved in beauty can still cause discomfort, pain or just dissatisfaction. Therefore, this chapter is devoted to concerns affecting the health of the body, including those which can be considered medical in nature.

Health issues for young gay people

All humanity is subject to ageing and problems of the body causing poor health, including disease. However, if a person is gay and wants to meet other gay people for friendship, intimacy or a relationship, it can lead to increased sexual activity. This is especially so, if gay people mainly meet at gay venues or via online dating services. “Safe sex” is a concept which can save lives and prevent much suffering of people who have sex with others. This has been discussed in the chapter on HIV, the virus which is almost universally acknowledged by experts to cause AIDS. Please note that even nowadays, in spite of the forms of proof available, there are certain people willing to argue that the earth is flat, rather than a sphere. Other health issues which have not been discussed are covered in this chapter.

Even if a person is wearing a condom to practise safe sex, it is possible to catch sexually transmitted diseases for which a condom offers no protection. This is not written here to frighten individuals but to help people who may not have thought about this issue to make informed choices. Apart from precautions to be taken to prevent such diseases, where possible, there are relevant social issues.

An example of such a disease is genital herpes virus infection,⁵³ which could be passed on through oral sex from the penis or vagina to the mouth, or from the mouth to the penis or vagina, if no condom is worn. Genital herpes causes painful blisterlike sores which normally disappear by themselves, if a person has a fully-functional immune system, although there is no actual cure (to remove the virus completely from the body). Antiviral products are available which can reduce the time that outbreaks of herpes must be endured.

Pubic lice (“scabies”)⁵⁴ can also be transferred during sex, even when a condom is worn. Typically, they are passed between the regions of pubic hair of individuals having sex, so they can bypass a condom. Pubic lice, as with head lice, cause the skin associated with hair to be very itchy. There is usually a rash with pubic lice.

The lice causing the problem dig just under the top layer of skin. Should one experience the unpleasant itch and be able to see and pluck out an unusual little dot on the skin where pubic hair is located, then one might see tiny little legs move back and forth (frightening but harmless)! Treatment is simple. Any medicated shampoo for head lice, purchased from a local pharmacy, should also be effective for pubic lice (scabies).

However, it might be necessary to repeat the treatment after any eggs of the lice hatch. When buying the medicated shampoo for head lice, one should not need to endure laughs and giggles from others. Of course, it is unprofessional for pharmacy staff to giggle, even if someone asks for treatment for pubic rather than head lice; however, giggles could spring from people waiting at the pharmacy. In this case, seeking treatment does not require a visit to a medical doctor (GP).

Much can be said in this book on such diseases. However, I do not wish to broaden the scope of this book. There are many books written on such diseases and general information on these is not difficult to find, so is not being discussed here. The author prefers to write about certain issues relevant to young gay people which are unlikely to be found easily elsewhere, all in the same book. None-the-less, each book has its purposes.

Both genital herpes and pubic lice are examples of organisms which can be passed on that can produce a sign of a problem, even though herpes infections may be present without symptoms. Nevertheless, these problems can have solutions and unpleasantness often need not be endured. With such problems, even if minor, it is good to seek help from a medical doctor as the first point of contact, if unsure what to do. The same applies to other conditions mentioned in this chapter, even those without an infectious agent.

Conditions have been singled out which can apply to gay people, or at least those who have sex with others, even if bisexual or not necessarily gay. My choice has been based on observation and experience. Conditions are presented which can be identified and addressed, even though a reader may not know this at first.

Seeking medical advice and preventing the spread of infections

There seem to be people suffering from treatable medical conditions who do not realise this, at least in my past experience as a taxi driver. Although my PhD training is scientific and not medical, I could recognise signs of various medical conditions while doing my job and talking with others. Sometimes people would speak to me about their medical problems, or signs and symptoms which they did not think were medical. In other cases, people quite openly discussed topics of a medical nature. This led to my awareness of the potential for great suffering caused by conditions where there is a remedy, often a cheap and simple one; certainly in a developed country, where poverty is not as widespread as in developing countries of the world.

Due to the burden of suffering caused by readily treatable medical conditions, I have included this chapter in my book. The first issue is infection control. Examples of conditions, such as genital herpes and pubic lice (scabies) which were introduced in the last section, can be spread by sex. Therefore, awareness of them should enable a person to avoid passing them on until symptoms have subsided or the condition has been successfully treated. In my opinion, it is helpful to have unusual changes checked by a medical doctor, even when it may be embarrassing. Furthermore, during this time, it is better not to have sex with others to whom a condition can be transferred, even if as harmless as pubic lice. With HIV infection, the need to prevent infections spreading is obvious, even though a person may not know that he or she has the HIV virus.



Many things can be checked but are not a problem. For example, changes in moles on the skin. Although some exposure to the sun is normal and healthy, a great deal of exposure can increase risk of skin cancers.⁵⁵ Therefore, people who enjoy going to the beach or have indoor tanning because they like the look of a tan need to take care. Even if people work long hours indoors in an office and only spend all day at the beach on weekends, skin cancer risk is increased. Skin cancers and possible death can be prevented, if changes to a mole on the skin have been noticed and moles checked. A mole which can lead to skin cancer might not be in an area receiving most of the sunlight. There may be a change in size, texture, shape (such as unevenness) or colour, or a mole may discharge fluid or bleed, although in most cases moles are harmless.

This is only an example but any unusual change which could have medical relevance should be checked by a medical doctor. In my opinion, awareness of problems with the body can be compared with awareness of car problems, where an unusual sign would be checked without too much thought. Many medical problems can be addressed or solved by just one visit to a medical doctor. Guys seem to be more reluctant to see a medical doctor than ladies, for whatever reason.

Alternative medicine

There are many branches of alternative medicine and medical doctors may express their distrust or negative opinions of any of these. Alternative medicine may also be called complementary medicine or associated with the term “allied health”. Furthermore, traditional “Western” (standard) medical training is necessary for practitioners to be called “doctors”. Alternative medicine may be associated with Traditional Chinese Medicine (“TCM”), Ayurvedic (ancient Indian) medicine, “Western” herbal medicine, naturopathy, homeopathy and many other practices. Although health problems big enough to warrant a visit to a medical doctor could have a simple solution, sometimes they do not. Occasionally, a medical problem can involve many fruitless visits to medical doctors over a long period of time, even years. In such cases a person may feel like giving up. Certain health and medical problems seem to have solutions from alternative medicine.

It is more encouraging to try them if a friend or relative has reported success after seeing an alternative medicine practitioner. In my experience, there are potentially great benefits from keeping an open mind about trying alternative medicine where it might seem helpful. For example, instead of lifelong use of medication or surgery for my stomach problem causing a heartburn sensation (gastro-esophageal reflux disorder [GERD]), it was successfully treated with Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM). This involved a course of powdered herbal medicines taken over a fairly long time. Treatment was not expensive compared with standard medical treatment. Nowadays, I still see a Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) practitioner when it is appropriate. I also see a naturopath once per year for a check-up after having had a successful treatment for another relatively minor problem. The naturopath sells me certain dietary supplements which are useful to me.

Alternative medicine may often be capable of easing the frustration of certain people with medical problems which do not respond well to standard medical care and can also be used for a number of minor health problems.

Alternative medicine is usually unregulated, at least compared with traditional “Western” (standard) medicine but this varies by country and branch of alternative medicine. This means that there are risks. Herbal preparations could contain traces of medical drugs or toxins and certain practitioners could be dishonest, making false claims or charging unfairly. Therefore, when it seems helpful to try alternative medicine, it is necessary to search for a practitioner one can trust. This can take time. However, once one has found good local practitioners one can benefit with greatly reduced risks.

Traditional “Western” (standard) medicine and branches of alternative medicine follow different principles. It is more likely that they consider the health of the whole body (holistic), rather than simply of its parts. Standard medicine has a requirement for scientific evidence for diagnoses and treatments, which is a great advantage. However, alternative medical methods may also be effective, even though they can be difficult to prove scientifically. Alternative medicine practitioners may be reluctant to talk about cures for problems so that medical authorities cannot accuse them of making false claims (without scientific evidence), even if alternative medical treatments are effective. Hence, the requirement for an open mind, with healthy scepticism or care to think carefully.

The amount of scientific research available for branches of alternative medicine is increasing, so hopefully also its acceptance by most people.

When used together with standard medical treatment, alternative medicine is usually called complementary medicine, such as when herbal preparations are used to reduce side effects of standard medicinal drugs. If alternative medicine is used together with standard medical care, the medical doctors, hospital- or other staff should be informed. Alternative medicine can increase certain risks, such as excessive internal bleeding during surgery due to herbal treatments.

Therefore, it must be considered as part of any standard medical treatment. Patients, their friends or relatives should not fear an angry response or being treated with disrespect because of their involvement or interest in alternative medicine. Many medical doctors are open-minded about alternative medicine and in any case, they would need to know if it is being used, so as to deliver the best possible medical care.

In general, standard medical treatments and drugs have been developed for maximum strength and with minimum side effects, as opposed to alternative medical treatments due to different principles involved. Therefore, serious medical problems (such as late stage cancer) may not benefit from alternative medicine. However, if treatment had been done early, alternative medicine might have been successful in certain cases. None-the-less, just as clinical trials of experimental treatments of standard medicine can give hope to people who are dying, so can alternative medicine when no other treatment options are available. For medical and health problems which are less serious, especially when help is sought early, alternative medicine can be beneficial for health care.



Pregnancy

In a book which discusses issues of sex and intimacy involving guys and ladies, it is appropriate to address some issues associated with pregnancy. It has been included by me in a chapter concerned with medical issues, although it was difficult for me to decide where to include it. I believe that medical doctors may be good sources of information on pregnancy, preventing and terminating it. However, if unhappy about advice given, one should always seek a second (or third) opinion. Gay people may be more likely to consider issues surrounding pregnancy when they are trying to determine their sexual preference, or when they are dating or intimate with a person of the opposite sex. This can commonly happen if a person is bisexual. Having associated with medical doctors at different times of my career and in my personal life, I think that I should include a section on pregnancy in memory of them. Medical doctors can readily be exposed to heartbreaking decisions surrounding pregnancy.

Pregnancy is one of the miracles of human life. Without doubt, the amazement of a normal human birth has touched the lives of many people at some point in time. Yet, a pregnancy occurring by surprise after sex, intimacy or during a relationship can cause strong emotions. These can include excitement, joy, happiness, sorrow, shock or despair. While it could be easy to dismiss the emotions felt by the father, whether or not confirmed to be the father by a laboratory test (there can always be more than one potential father), these should be considered together with the feelings of the mother. In my opinion, both guys and ladies should consider the potential for pregnancy well before sex with a member of the opposite sex.

A woman I knew was passionate about the issue of abortion. She was a keen advocate of the right to abortion. This lady was a very good person, intelligent and well-informed. In support of abortion, she said that decisions are usually made by males (this may be changing), whereas it is a female who becomes pregnant and gives birth. Without having undergone an abortion, of course (being male), I acknowledge that it is likely to be a traumatic experience for most women who choose to have it. It can also be traumatic for people she knows, including the father (or potential fathers). Decisions surrounding abortion can also involve females who are not yet adults. In my opinion, it is best if most of the information they receive about sex, pregnancy, contraception (birth control to prevent pregnancy) and abortion are not obtained by themselves only. Even adults should have the luxury of knowing such important information well before the possibility of pregnancy occurs in their lives. I fully respect the possibility that a female of any age may look forward to being a mother. However, I think that she should have the means to plan to be a mother without undue suffering or fear that she cannot give the best she can to her child (such as a place to live and good nutrition for health). Abortion can be a response to an unplanned pregnancy, as can struggling to cope after a child is born. Therefore, I think that education, thought and planning should go before any possibility for pregnancy if a female has sex with a male.

There are many methods of contraception⁵⁶ and as nasty and clinical it can be to inform oneself or one's loved ones about it, it can save much sorrow and heartbreak. Indeed, contraception can be practised by males and females (even both of them during sex between them). No methods are absolutely guaranteed to prevent 100% of pregnancies. There are permanent methods of contraception involving surgery (such as a vasectomy for males or tubal ligation for females), which might not be able to be reversed in the future after lifestyle changes. In my opinion, contraception is better than abortion, to avoid the birth of an unwanted baby. It must be a great tragedy in life to have been born unwanted, even if living a happy life.

Adoption does not automatically mean an unwanted pregnancy had occurred, as there can be many reasons for adoption. Pregnancy does not only result from voluntary consent to sex between a male and a female. It can also result from rape or persuasion against the will of a male or female; such as bargaining for love or loyalty, or pregnancy for money or genetically compatible spare parts for surgery. There may be religious considerations by someone practising a religion and this book includes a chapter on spiritual matters. Here, I wish to avoid moralising about sex between males and females. In this book, I have already discussed sex, intimacy and relationships. It is up to each person to think about his or her own values and choices in life, given sufficient information. No doubt their loved ones and friends would assist them in this process.

Smoking

Smoking being discussed in this section is of tobacco (nicotine being the active “drug” ingredient), such as cigarettes and cigars. Smoking of marijuana is covered in the chapter on drugs, including alcohol. Although I know smokers who have told me of their enjoyment of smoking tobacco, I know of far more who seem frustrated in their effort to quit smoking once they are addicted to it. Satisfactions of smoking might include relaxation and reduction of any stress or hunger experienced. Perhaps one could also include approval from mates. Growing up, I experienced peer pressure from other males to smoke. However, it is much less popular than it used to be, with taboos having arisen surrounding the use of tobacco products (meaning social disapproval) when it used to be considered fine to smoke.

Smoking can be expensive and has many health risks, including increased risks of heart disease and stroke, cancers (notably lung cancer) and potential harm to an unborn baby during pregnancy. In my experience, many people do not like the smell of smoking tobacco, including smokers themselves! However, it is quite possible that smoking persists in communities for reasons other than advertising and pressure from mates to smoke.

Maybe it provides relief from certain alterations of mood, such as depression, when a person does not know of or have alternatives. Whatever the reason to smoke, it is possible to quit and products to help are available.⁵⁷

There are medicines available from a medical doctor by prescription and nicotinecontaining products, including nicotine patches and chewing gum. Products containing nicotine may be available at pharmacies without a prescription from a medical doctor. These products and medicines can make it easier to quit. Indeed, visiting a medical doctor to obtain advice might be worthwhile before quitting by oneself because it can be very difficult for a large number of people to quit smoking. It is likely that after having quit smoking, a person may be more susceptible to stress. Therefore, it may be difficult to stop smoking if leading a high-stress lifestyle. Furthermore, once a person has given up smoking, it may be difficult to remain comfortable in the presence of smokers, certainly without feeling the need to smoke. This is an issue for gay people who go to venues of entertainment, such as bars and night-clubs. Frequently, people smoke and drink alcohol in these places.

Drinking alcohol or even seeing others do this may increase the desire to smoke. However, being mindful of reasons not to smoke can help smokers quit and stay off cigarettes and other tobacco products.



Alcoholism

Just as smokers can be gay or straight, so can those who have drinks containing alcohol. For most people, drinking alcohol in moderation causes no problems but for some, addiction to alcohol can take place. This can occur rapidly. Bars, night-clubs and other venues of entertainment are often attended by people who smoke tobacco and drink alcohol. Furthermore, drinks containing alcohol are readily available for adults attending such venues. Hence the reason to include alcoholism in this section. Alcoholics can be gay or straight. Alcoholism has various health and medical risks associated with it. People who are addicted to drinking alcohol may not look after their diet or health well, so there could be nutritional problems to take care to avoid. Medical problems can include damage to the liver (chiefly responsible for breaking down alcohol), such as cirrhosis of the liver. As with smoking, drinking alcohol while pregnant can potentially cause harm to the unborn child. Giving up alcohol means avoiding any alcoholic drinks. For alcoholics who have given up drinking alcohol, one drink is likely to mean a strong desire to keep drinking. Indeed, even people who are not alcoholics often cannot stop at one drink. The first drink leads to more until they are drunk. If one goes to venues of entertainment, one should know whether or not drinking is a problem beforehand.

If one has a tendency to drink to excess after the first drink, then it could be better to avoid drinks containing alcohol, if one just wishes to go out to meet people. Plans should be made to avoid drinking any alcohol if driving, or if drinking to ensure reliable transport home. Even though there is a legal limit, driving at night can be more dangerous and it is easier to avoid accidents which are not necessarily one's fault (such as another driver going through a red traffic light at a road intersection), if not having had any alcohol. During my taxi shifts on Friday and Saturday nights, I often saw people weaving on the roads, spinning car tyres and travelling very close to the car in front; all situations for potential accidents. For those who have discovered that they already have an alcohol problem and may be alcoholics, Alcoholics Anonymous is one organisation which can help.⁵⁰ Gay people are supposed to be welcome at meetings and there may even be a special group for gay people.

Depression

Although depression is included in the chapter on mental health and self-harm, including suicide, depression is regarded as a medical problem. From reports of others whom I know, depression can be poorly diagnosed in the setting of a doctor's practice if a medical doctor is not used to seeing patients with depression. Depression can be associated with loss (such as a marriage or relationship breakup) or grief after a loved one has died. It can suddenly appear after childbirth, surgery or a seemingly trivial illness after a major event. Depression may lead to loss of appetite and interest in sex. It can also cause tiredness and inability to sleep (insomnia) or unusual aches and pains of the body.

Loss of interest in activities and persistent negative and unhappy thoughts and feelings are better known signs of depression, which can include the desire to kill oneself (suicide). This makes depression dangerous, especially if severe.

With problems of gay people to come out or difficult relationships and circumstances in life, depression is a risk. Sometimes depression may actually be normal, such as when part of the grieving process. Modern "Western" culture does not appear to be good at helping people to grieve in many circumstances, so that they can process their sense of loss with the passage of time.

There are a range of effective medical treatments for depression, including various medications (anti-depressants). However, if depression is normal (such as when grieving), then medicinal drugs might not be necessary and counselling might be more helpful. There are even herbal preparations which might be effective against depression, without using medications (such as St. John's Wort). Although it is possible that anti-depressants might be unnecessary, it can also be said that such medications and other treatments for depression can mean living a normal life for people who could not do so otherwise. If suspected of having depression, it is good to see a medical doctor and possibly have a referral to see a psychiatrist, if necessary. Although depression can simply result from distressing circumstances in life, levels of depression can vary and depression can be dangerous. Therefore, discussing it with people one trusts and seeking help are important.

Sleep disorders

Driving a taxi at night and having done years of alternating day- and night-shift work during my PhD research years makes me familiar with sleep problems. Quite often, socialising for gay people involves going to venues of entertainment (bars and nightclubs) at night, creating lifestyle patterns for potential sleep problems. Sleep is very complicated, so it is difficult to determine how to ensure that a person has enough hours of sleep and of sufficient quality. In general, many people lead busy lives with irregular hours and sleep can easily be poor. Sleep problems can make it difficult to be efficient and cope with the demands of life. It may make it harder to keep hobbies and interests in addition to work one has to do. Certain jobs involving shift-work are associated with sleep problems and thus need more care to ensure adequate rest.

If one is finding that one has trouble sleeping at night and is tired often or constantly during the day, it is a good sign of a sleep disorder. Problems with sleep may also be a symptom of depression. A sleep cycle is reset by light and operates in a pattern called a "circadian rhythm". From my own experience of minor sleep problems, there are several methods to overcome them before seeking help from a medical doctor or visiting a sleep clinic or centre.

Although there are medications and herbal preparations to assist in gaining normal sleep, there are simpler solutions. Firstly, try to make life simpler in order to get enough hours of rest. Stressful problems and a busy life make it harder to sleep. If sleep is poor, then one usually needs even more time just to rest. Even if lying awake in bed, the body is obtaining the rest that it requires. Trying to keep regular patterns of activity and sleep also help. For example, if one rises early at the same time each day, then one is more likely to feel tired at the same time every night. People have different needs for sleep, young people often needing more sleep than older people. Therefore, one must be sure to have the sleep one needs, not what another person thinks is fine. As light helps to reset sleep patterns, it is helpful to rise with the sun or if this is not practical, to turn on the light as soon as one rises. If one habitually rises late in the morning, it is possible to gradually bring back one's rising time until it is early in the morning (such as when the sun rises). This is easier to do if going to sleep early at night and by keeping regular hours. There are solutions and people do not need to endure constant tiredness and insomnia.



Learning about health

In my opinion, it is good to go through life accumulating more knowledge about one's own body and health needs. Requirements of the body are different for everybody. Therefore, it is helpful to develop strategies to stay healthy. For example, I had a strategy to protect me from colds and bouts of the flu, which cause one to feel sick and miserable. At a time when I found that I was catching colds frequently, I took a daily vitamin C tablet whenever I was healthy but around someone who was sick (such as at work) until a couple of days after this person was free of symptoms (no coughing or sneezing). After doing this, I had far fewer colds and flu infections. Avoiding dramatic temperature changes also was helpful, where there was air conditioning on hot days. Personal means of staying healthy may involve standard or alternative medicine. Along the path of life many people are happy to give suggestions if asked. As a general principle, if a friend or someone else seems to be healthy when one would think it should be difficult for him or her, there is an opportunity to learn something useful about healthy practices. For example, someone may always seem energetic and rested while leading a busy life. Reading books about healthy and positive activities, watching relevant television shows and informing oneself on specific matters of health are all ways of increasing knowledge on health. The more that one can do this, the greater the chances of resilience, in my opinion.

Chapter 11 : Mental health

- and self-harm practices, including suicide

This is a confronting chapter for me to write, as I had some emotional problems as a teenager that passed in time and I tried to kill myself as a young adult. Mental health still has a stigma attached to it, adding difficulties for people with poor mental health or a mental health condition. Being gay, I am convinced that problems coping with sexual preferences can cause psychological harm. In this chapter, I shall describe experiences which illustrate how being unable to cope with being gay or the reactions of others to coming out as gay can cause poor mental health. In addition, I shall look at various needs which must be satisfied for good mental health and suggest ways to achieve this. This is motivated by the belief that discussing mental health and self-harm in this book can potentially relieve much suffering of gay and straight people, especially young people who have not yet been able to discover constructive ways of coping with events, thoughts or feelings which can disturb the mind.

The seeds of poor mental health

Before describing experiences of mental health problems or looking at ways to achieve good mental health, it seems appropriate to consider the origins of poor mental health. A proportion of readers of this book will not have experience of a mental health condition and hopefully never will. In order to understand these problems in others (such as friends or loved ones) when unfamiliar with the difficulties, it is helpful to be aware of shared experiences which can lead to mental health problems in some people but not others. Although much scientific knowledge is available to understand the diagnosis and treatment of many different mental health conditions, I do not wish to explore such findings in detail in this book. Not only is my biomedical science training not specifically in mental health but writing about this at great length in this book is not likely to be helpful to readers who can find such information elsewhere. It is more beneficial to discuss practical considerations in this chapter and make constructive comments to help readers have good mental health.

None-the-less, there are scientific concepts relevant to understanding mental health without which a reader could feel lost. In a previous chapter entitled “drugs, including alcohol and the genetic lottery”, I have explained the basic brain science required to understand mental health problems and their pharmacological treatment. This was in the section called “brain science as background to understanding recreational drug actions”. Although the brain science previously covered was used to explain the action of recreational drugs and processes such as addiction, the same knowledge can be applied to mental health and medical drugs used in treatment which affect the function of the brain.

Rather than repeat this information, I shall summarise the main features of brain biology and function covered before and expand on this for the purpose of discussing mental health in this chapter. The explanations provided here are simplified to avoid too many distracting details.

At the cellular level, the brain has many nerve cells (neurons) with receptors for different neurotransmitters.^{5,6,41} The neurons function to allow different parts of the brain to communicate. The different neurotransmitters act in circuits within the brain that connect different brain regions.



This is necessary to coordinate brain function in various regions at the same time. Neurons can also connect to one another in complex patterns. This enables large areas of the brain to operate like a computer. However, not all the brain is devoted to generating and processing thought and emotions. There are higher and lower brain regions, in terms of how far up or down in the brain these are located. There is also a difference in the nature of the functions corresponding to the brain regions.

Lower regions regulate vital processes (essential for life) in the body which happen largely automatically, such as body temperature, breathing, many activities of organ systems, heart rate and blood pressure. Lower brain regions produce hormones to control different activities in the body and these regions also generate sensations of thirst, hunger, sleep versus wakefulness and sexual desire. Higher brain regions process sensory information for vision, hearing, touch (including pain), smell and taste. They also produce thought, direct attention and make decisions. Emotions are generated and memories are stored by cooperation of lower and higher brain regions, as is voluntary movement (“motor control”). Thus, from the association of small cells into complex structures and through communication, the brain controls the functions of the body and allows individuals to experience, make sense of and have opinions about the world.

Specific brain regions are involved in many unpleasant symptoms associated with mental health problems.^{5,41} Thus fear and anxiety are due to activity of the amygdala. When shown a frightening face, this area of the brain is normally activated. The amygdala is connected to the hippocampus, which allows fear to cause memory formation. It is also connected to the prefrontal cortex, which together with the hippocampus modify activity of the amygdala so that fear is not normally excessive, serving only to avoid harm. The prefrontal cortex is important in thought, attention and decisions but unpleasant symptoms are also associated with this region; namely worry, guilt, suicidal thoughts, obsessions and compulsions. In the chapter covering recreational drug use, the mesolimbic pathway for reward involving the neurotransmitter dopamine was discussed. In addition to experiencing pleasure, in this pathway the nucleus accumbens is associated with symptoms of delusions and hallucinations (to be discussed later along with psychoses such as schizophrenia). Too much dopamine can cause these symptoms; for example, due to schizophrenia or frequent use of amphetamines or cocaine for recreational purposes.

Various mental health conditions (such as depression) are often associated with abnormal function of neurotransmitters in a complex manner. It is easy to draw the conclusion that mental health problems only exist because of brain neurotransmitter imbalances to be fixed using medicinal drugs. However, it is equally imaginable that stressful events in life come first, which then result in changes in neurotransmitter function and the experience of unpleasant symptoms. The way changes in the brain occur during development of a mental health condition will be discussed in the next section.

Mental health conditions develop though the influence of the environment and genetics to varying extents.^{5,40} It is rare for a particular mental health problem to be due to a single gene. In a previous chapter concerning recreational drug use, I briefly discussed genetics of the brain within the context of recreational drug effects and addiction. The same influences of genetics on brain structure and function apply to mental health. Genes determine individual proteins to be made in the brain. Many genes contribute to the function of different regions of the brain, including the production, activity and breakdown of neurotransmitters. Rather than attribute mental health conditions to a limited number of genes, it is more accurate to acknowledge that certain genes increase the risk of these conditions.

As genetics is subject to heredity from biological parents, risk factors for specific mental health conditions tend to exist in families. A mental health problem need never be experienced by a person at risk to have one, if not also experiencing stressful events. Hence, such forms of stress are the seeds of poor mental health.

Everyone has a breaking point, mentally or emotionally, in response to various stresses. This is important to think about when trying to understand mental health problems from the point of view of someone who has never experienced them but wishes to understand them. Stresses can arise at different times in life. An unhappy childhood is an early source of stress. Business, financial problems or relationship conflicts happen later in life.

Disease or grief due to loss of a friend, relative or loved one can happen at any point in time. In addition, the extent to which common stresses affect people varies, such as ageing or small problems in daily life. For example, one person may lose or forget something trivial and not be very concerned, whereas another individual may feel very aggravated by this. Medical treatments also impose stresses, such as surgery. Even joyful events can cause stress due to hormones released in the body under the influence of strong emotions, or physiological effects such as the heart beating faster. With so much stress in ordinary life, it is understandable that the capacity to cope with it might be exceeded in certain people at a particular point in time.

Changes in brain function as a mental health condition develops

The view of mental health conditions being unavoidable due to a person having a single or small number of genes causing the problems is outdated.^{5,40} Poor mental health is avoidable, although the extent of this depends on genetics and stresses encountered in life.

Just as genes can predispose people to mental health conditions, they can also confer resilience on people, to recover from the effect of stress. Genes can also make the brain more resistant to the effects of stresses to change brain function. However, because there are many genes which influence brain function, there will be genes to support good brain function and other genes which weaken it during stress.

In the chapter concerned with recreational drug use, genetics were shown to increase or decrease risk of addiction to certain drugs. For example, certain genes related to dopamine activity predispose individuals to cocaine addiction.⁴⁹ Dopamine is a neurotransmitter which can also be used to illustrate differences in brain function and changes in mental health.^{5,41} In the same chapter just mentioned, symptoms of attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) were described to include a lack of ability to maintain attention, generally.

In this case, a mental health condition can be linked to reduced levels of dopamine in the prefrontal cortex of the brain responsible for attention. Genetic differences exist to determine the level of dopamine available in the prefrontal cortex of the brain. Higher dopamine availability in the prefrontal cortex allows individuals to devote more attention to activities requiring this. In a normal individual such a genetic variation can be an advantage for achievement which depends on maintaining attention. Furthermore, when under a form of stress in which increased attention assists in coping, such a person would cope better (suffer less). Although it may seem that more dopamine is always better, biological factors in the body have an optimal range.



Too much dopamine in the prefrontal cortex under conditions of stress lead to worry and can cause anxiety. Therefore, mental health conditions can result from prolonged neurotransmitter activity below or above optimal levels.

Changes in neurotransmitter function during a mental health condition are not necessarily simple, even if it is easy to illustrate these changes by considering a single neurotransmitter. In the chapter discussing recreational drug use, schizophrenia was given as an example of a mental health condition with abnormal dopamine function. Schizophrenia has so-called “positive” and “negative” symptoms.^{5,41} Positive symptoms include delusions and hallucinations. Negative symptoms can be absence of feelings of pleasure, social withdrawal and difficulty paying attention (as in ADHD). Theories of the causes of schizophrenia differ but the following explanation for symptoms is likely. Positive symptoms result from too much dopamine in the nucleus accumbens via the mesolimbic pathway for reward (discussed in the same chapter), whereas negative symptoms result from too little dopamine in the prefrontal cortex and/or the nucleus accumbens via the mesolimbic pathway for reward.

As dopamine is widely distributed within the brain via neurotransmitter circuits, it can be difficult to treat a mental health condition with medicinal drugs, which I shall explain further in the section on treatment of mental health conditions. Anyway, I have tried to demonstrate how changes in the brain can result in mental health conditions, whether these changes are relatively simple or more complex.

Earlier in this chapter and in the chapter covering recreational drugs, I explained the concept of circuits within the brain, each acting to release one of a number of neurotransmitters in various brain regions. If one can accept the fact that certain genes represent risk factors for a particular mental health condition, then stress can enable the problem to develop.^{5,58} Due to stress, neurotransmitter circuits in the brain may be activated at levels above normal and might also be poorly regulated, meaning that neurotransmitter activity does not return to normal after the stress is over. Genes increasing the risk of a mental health problem increase the likelihood of this because a healthy circuit (due to health-promoting genes) could otherwise recover and return to normal. Extra stress can damage such circuits so that they can only function at activities below normal and thus are unsuitable for dealing with stress effectively. Indeed, prolonged activation of neurotransmitter circuits can eliminate connections between and cause death of neurons in the brain. Alternatively, a given neurotransmitter circuit may function at levels below normal due to genetic factors and not be effective to help cope with stress. Damage to a given circuit affects all the brain regions which the circuit supplies. The function of the brain is complex and normal circuits can make up for the abnormal function of stressed or damaged circuits. However, if stress continues then too many circuits become damaged and a mental health condition results. Even if there is no stress for a while, the brain is predisposed to a mental health problem which may develop if stress suddenly occurs at a future point in time. The more genes for the risk of a given mental health condition that a person has, the more likely that this condition develops after the experience of one or more forms of stress.

Returning to the example of schizophrenia mentioned earlier, genes place a person at risk of developing the condition. Should stressful events be experienced, various neurotransmitter circuits can be abnormally activated and then cease to function normally, giving rise to a number of symptoms and allowing the condition to be diagnosed as schizophrenia. Damage to one circuit can lead to positive symptoms of delusions or hallucinations and additional damage to other circuits can lead to negative symptoms, such as inability to experience pleasure, problems in maintaining attention and avoidance of social contact. Other mental health conditions can develop in a similar way, each characterised by a cluster of symptoms but not necessarily easy to diagnose.

Stress related to difficulty coping with being gay, mental health problems and suicide

In the last chapter covering social media and bullying (section entitled “bullying by spreading gossip and promoting social exclusion”) I wrote about a young gay man in his early 20s, who came out at high school when aged 15 and experienced social exclusion through to his last year at high school (aged 17). He spoke to me about the effect this had on him and gave me permission to write about it. The reason to write more about it here is due to the effect this had on his mental health.

This young man naturally had few friends, even before coming out at high school. One could say that in terms of personality he tended to be introverted (inwardly directed) rather than extraverted (outwardly-directed). Of course, after coming out he lost most of his friends and was avoided by his peers, as mentioned before. Nonetheless, he still had one friend left, who accepted him and the fact that he was gay. However, the young man had no love and affection in his life at the time. A girl had condemned the behaviour of a couple of guys he had a crush on, who had subsequently avoided him after he told them. However, he disbelieved that he could do better and assumed that he would stay lonely.

Even before coming out at high school, the young gay man had suicidal thoughts. However, they became worse due to coming out. Indeed, he told me that he had the most suicidal thoughts just after coming out and experiencing the reaction of others. He dismissed the desire to kill himself as part of puberty and used denial of this as a coping strategy. The young man also told me of some self-harm motivation, which he considered to be like a cry for attention.

Emotional disturbance and depression became a problem for the young gay man. The friends who rejected him at high school apparently did not hate him. According to him, they had fear which the young man then internalised. He said that he had severe depression at the time but was unaware of this as depression because he did not know about the nature of depression. After the young man left high school, he felt more shut-in. Depression took over his life although he still did not recognise it for what it was. He sought affection from his mother to overcome depression (his parents were divorced and he was much closer to his mother). He felt different from others, thinking how happy the lives of other people were but not his own life.

Now in his early 20s he still has depression and suicidal thoughts. However, he said that he wants to turn anger outwards and not inwards. He still finds it difficult to trust people because of the feeling of having been betrayed. He has notions of self-blame but thinks he needs someone to blame. The whole of his life appears bleak and full of “gloom and doom”.

From this description of depression according to a young man who had an unhappy experience of coming out, I hope that any other people with depression may recognise similarities and seek help. Depression can be dangerous due to the risk of killing oneself if there are suicidal thoughts. Mental health conditions can be associated with feeling alienated and/or social isolation, placing people at greater risk of death than if they are in contact and communicating with others. Yet even then, a person with depression who is suicidal may not understand this to be a treatable condition or tell anyone. Depression is probably the most common mental health condition. Due to concern that young gay people may be at risk of this but not know much about it,



I devoted a section to depression in the chapter just before this one, entitled “medical and bodily health issues and alternative medicine”.

Some additional relevant information is provided at the end of this chapter because it concerns treatment of mental health conditions in general, rather than depression specifically.

Just as for the young gay man whose difficulties I have discussed earlier, I also had experiences with mental health problems during my teenage years. Initially, I entered my teens as a well-adjusted boy. Although I had close friends I was quite introverted. Perhaps I could say that I first had gay thoughts and feelings of a sexual nature a few months short of turning 13, the year that I started high school. Initially they were quite subtle but then became very intense within a few months. It made me suffer because I denied and resisted gay sexual thoughts and feelings. In addition, I started to hate myself. My performance at high school was mostly reasonable but I could have achieved better than I did. The disturbance I felt became worse and I became socially withdrawn (avoiding friends). I started to have depression in the sense that I felt depressed and lost interest in many things, whereas before I was quite interested in life, generally. Often, for no apparent reason I felt guilty and worried about trivial matters. In addition, I had problems with obsessions and compulsions. This meant that I couldn't help thinking certain trivial thoughts (obsessions) and this inability to eliminate them from my consciousness was disturbing. Equally distressing were sensations of needing to perform trivial actions many times over, like straightening or checking things (compulsions). In childhood I had experienced these but they were comparatively mild and I outgrew them. As far as I know, in a very minor form they can be a normal part of childhood. Although these experiences of my early teenage years were unpleasant to me, I was not suicidal at this stage.

Depression to me is like a cloud that descends over or envelopes the mind like a type of fog. It seems to absorb any positive thoughts and feelings, allowing negativity to be amplified. Then one does not feel any pleasure. Ultimately, one does not feel anything positive but one is disturbed and can want to kill oneself.

If one does not seek help or this is not noticed by someone else who intervenes, suicide can result. At no time do I believe that depression which I experienced was severe, perhaps being only mild to moderate. However, it was still very unpleasant and gave me some understanding of what people can experience with a mental health condition classed as a mood disorder (affecting mood), sometimes also known as an “affective” disorder.

My concern about gay thoughts and feelings grew and became disturbing. Fortunately, I have good parents who love me and have always been caring. At the age of 14 years I was very upset and told my parents that I was gay. They were sympathetic and arranged that I saw a psychiatrist, thinking that this would help me. In fact, I did not really address my gay sexual preference then, although I was able to avoid it being a major source of suffering by focussing on other areas in my life.

The psychiatrist appeared to assume that I might outgrow being gay but no matter what he thought, he helped me with my mental health problems over several years, so that mentally I was much better adjusted by the time I finished high school and also when I entered university immediately afterwards to start a Bachelor of Science Degree course.

Although I was not prescribed antidepressant medication for depression during my teenage years, I used a benzodiazepine (“minor” tranquiliser) for anxiety which became more obvious to me when I tried to change my socially withdrawn behaviour. However, even though this could now be diagnosed as a “social phobia”, I think that I experienced more general anxiety. None-the-less, anxiety became more intense when approaching and trying to talk to others. It could be likened to a feeling of mild panic or “butterflies in the stomach”, as when anticipating an unpleasant impending event. At first I found I could not socialise without the medication. However, I quickly got used to feeling more relaxed in company and the same dose of anti-anxiety medication gave me a “stoned” feeling. One can imagine this to be like continuously being hit over the head with pillows until slightly dizzy and numb. At such times it was harder to think and concentrate. Reducing the dose made me feel better until I stopped using the medication altogether because I had no need of it to interact normally with others. Apparently, benzodiazepines became less popular for treating anxiety due to people using too many and too frequently, then becoming tolerant and addicted later. Beta-blockers were given to me for anxiety years later but I did not find them anywhere near as effective for anxiety, perhaps because I had some generalised anxiety as opposed to that merely relating to specific activities.

During all my university years I did not face the reality of being a gay man. I could somehow avoid deciding whether or not I was gay. Things suddenly became worse when I had additional stress, over and above anything to which I was usually accustomed. While attending university I was living with my parents. Although I had friends, enjoying their company, I did not have gay friends. At university, I mixed with others. Although my academic performance was reasonable, in the same manner as during high school it could have been better. In general my confidence improved over three years at university. After three years I went on a holiday overseas for a few months before commencing my fourth year at university, doing Honours (a research year). In spite of being able to cope with most of my Honours year (indeed, finding it interesting), the additional stress of trying to write a thesis created problems for me. I felt that I could not cope and experienced a fair amount of anxiety. My sense of worry about being gay grew and I did not think I was going to be able write and submit my Honours thesis.

This is like a book based on experiments performed over the year. In fact, I had a large amount of good data from my experiments and had worked hard over the academic year, so should have felt excited to write about the scientific work and draw conclusions. For some reason, I started not to value my own life. Although I think that I had depression, the symptoms of it did not seem to be very obvious. None-the-less, I became suicidal and tried to take my life.

Over a few days towards the end of my fourth year (Honours) at university, I was quite sure that I did not want to live. Any self-hatred did not seem obvious to me although I was distressed about being gay. Therefore, I cannot be sure to what extent low self-esteem may have been a factor in my attempted suicide. I planned how I would kill myself and went ahead with it one night before going to bed. I drank some cheap cooking wine that I found at home and swallowed a large number of barbiturate sleeping tablets which had been prescribed for my grandmother with more wine; they were accessible somewhere at home. In my opinion, medications which can be dangerous to others should be stored securely or locked away because one never knows when they could be used for harm and who by! Anyway, I woke up in the intensive care ward of a big hospital on a ventilator. Apparently, I had vomited during the night after taking the overdose of sleeping tablets and so might not have absorbed the intended dose.



For a couple of nights after the overdose I have vivid dreams and nightmares (disturbing dreams). After a brief period in hospital I was discharged and saw a psychiatrist for a short time afterwards. During this time, I decided to come out properly as a gay man because I knew this had been a major factor in attempting to commit suicide.

After writing my Honours thesis and thus completing my university degree (with associated potential for employment), I decided to go to Sydney to come out, as this was a large city with a very active gay community. Therefore, shortly after living and working in Sydney at the age of 21 years I fully accepted being gay. Having been awarded a first class Honours in biochemistry, I felt that I might have some research talent and set about to try to become involved with HIV/AIDS research. Nevertheless, at this point in time I did not have mental health problems and never in the rest of my life did I have them to the same extent as I did before coming out as a gay man and accepting my gay sexual preference completely.

Self-harm, including suicide

From many conversations with others, I am sure that mental health conditions can develop due to many different types of stress, not necessarily due to being gay. However, if a person is gay and does not come out or deal with it, there is increased risk of a mental health condition due to the experience of stress which may be more or less severe. Research findings support this.⁵⁹ In fact, if a young person is gay and has depression, then sexual preference should be taken into account during any treatment by a mental health professional. Discussions I have had with others on related topics confirm that distress due to being gay and a feeling of being unable to cope can contribute to poor mental health.

Regardless of the reason for poor mental health and whether a person is gay or straight, self-harm (including suicide) is a risk. Poor mental health need not be assigned a clinical label, although this does not mean it should be ignored. Labelling poor mental health with a term of disease can be upsetting or may even provide relief, depending on the experience and culture of a person.

It can be associated with a sense of stigma, whereby a person may feel that he or she is affected by something shameful. Indeed, mental health is still much of a taboo subject which people often seem to feel uncomfortable about discussing. If a person discusses any previous diagnoses of mental health conditions with a potential employer, he or she may consider this reduces his or her chances of employment before an employer has had an opportunity to see how well a person can do any particular job. Disclosure of this can potentially cause other problems in the life of an individual.

Therefore, these problems maintain the sense of stigma for mental health conditions. Alternatively, a person may receive a mental health problem diagnosis suggestive of a disease but be pleased, as this individual now knows what has been causing him or her distress and that there may be a potential solution available. Even if only due to the risk of self-harm, any state of poor mental health should be attended to, I think. Due to its complexity, which I shall discuss in the section on diagnosis and treatment at the end of this chapter, poor mental health may not be given a clinical label. However, it can still be improved. If poor mental health is addressed, a person can lead a happier and more productive life.

Although young gay and straight people can have suicidal thoughts and may attempt to commit suicide, differences have been reported by researchers.⁵⁹ More young people with same-sex preferences (gay or bisexual) are reported to have suicidal thoughts and attempt to kill themselves than young straight people. Furthermore, risk factors appear to be different when considering a large number of people, statistically. Specifically, same-sex preferences (gay or bisexual) were found to significantly increase the risk of suicidal thoughts and suicide attempts in young males and females.

When considering brain science, suicidal thoughts can be considered to result from circuits in the brain deficient in the neurotransmitter serotonin.^{5,58} Therefore, many standard antidepressant medications should improve this, given that a person does not kill him- or herself before treatment. Such medications are beneficial, even if the ideal medication or combinations of them are different and depend on any one or all potential mental health condition(s) present. Furthermore, it is even possible to localise suicidal thoughts to underactivity in certain areas of the brain (including part of the prefrontal cortex). However, this academic interest in suicide is all too simple an approach to addressing it. Suicide is only part of many self-harm practices. People who wish to harm themselves can have many reasons for doing so. Although I am not trained in mental health, I am aware through talking to others that many people will feel that they cannot tell others of their inner distress. Some but not all such people may desire that others know that they want to receive help. However, any self-harm signals a need for help, even if it results in death due to suicide and is thus too late. Depression can occur without suicidal thoughts, so suicide does not automatically follow depression and this means that a depressed person is not necessarily always suicidal.

Yet even if a person is suicidal, the risk that a person tries to kill him- or herself can vary depending on many other factors, including low self-esteem and lack of a good support network, emotionally and/or otherwise.

In writing about suicide, it can be assumed that I am mainly referring to actions of people with a mental health condition or emotional problem. However, with any topics relating to self-harm or suicide, I think that one must keep a very open mind, so as not to lose one's own life, that of loved ones, friends or indeed any fellow humans. Anyone could potentially feel like harming him- or herself under certain circumstances, I think. A person may attempt to commit suicide even if he or she is of sound mind, such as when experiencing financial difficulties, even if fate were to hold great riches in store for the person should he or she have lived a while longer. An assumption with suicide might also be that the thought, feeling or event before it has to be major or significant. In my opinion, an attempt at suicide can take place due to something trivial or insignificant, even if there are also greater factors involved beforehand. No matter what the reason for self-harm or suicide, I think that it should not just be up to the individual to avoid it. Rather, self-harm prevention is a team effort, for friends, loved ones and indeed the whole world. With an open mind, one can reach and help the greatest number of people, I think.

Low self-esteem definitely increases the risk of trying to kill oneself because a person with low self-esteem does not value him- or herself much. It also increases the risk of other forms of self-harm because respect for oneself is not there to a sufficient extent to prevent harm to oneself. If a person frequently hears that he or she is worthless or not good for anything, even if the person only hears this from him- or herself, then self-esteem can be reduced (even if not always the case). Of course, this can obviously occur when there is discrimination of any sort, including against gay people, women or people of different ethnic groups (racism).



The reason for low self-esteem may not be obvious. Perhaps it could be against young people because they do not have experience, education or money. It could be against older or “elderly” people for many reasons, such as that they need to be cared for or that they do not have money any more, even if it has already been spent on people they loved. Low self-esteem could be due to failure to live up to expectations, such as to be sporty, rich or successful. Unemployment, where people do not find work in spite of frequent efforts for a long time can damage self-esteem, as can long-term illness. If a person can work in spite of illness, the pressure may cause him or her to lose so-called friends or cause relationship problems. However, there may be no obvious reason for low self-esteem. In my opinion, there may be no obvious sign of it either. If a person who is loved is not obviously cherished or told so, then loss of self-esteem is more likely, I think.

Failure itself can reduce self-esteem. However, for this to occur, a person must be unable to separate failure in life from him- or herself. A person who does not succeed in some endeavour or who does not have certain features or qualities should not think of him- or herself “as a failure”, to use an expression. Hiding failure from people does not protect them from low-self esteem. In my opinion, people will often judge themselves in relation to observations made about other people, especially those most similar to themselves. However, a person who feels that he or she cannot attempt to succeed because it is pointless to try may already have lost his or her self-esteem, even if failure was never made obvious to him or her. People must always feel that they can express themselves and try to achieve something. Then failure only motivates a person to try harder or to change direction to another constructive activity. Of course, this is an ideal view and I understand that in spite of all efforts to make loved ones and members of the community feel included, a sense of failure can still arise in people, together with a corresponding drop in self-esteem.

Low-self esteem can always be raised. In the next section of this chapter I shall discuss this. Certainly, if a person has low-self esteem and thoughts of self-harm, this should be faced and addressed by this individual. Unfortunately, I do not think that the modern “Western” culture is very good at helping people with low self-esteem and thoughts of self-harm to cope. There are possible exceptions, including social subcultures and music to help people cope. Perhaps these often occur together because people find self-expression through music, especially with emotions and emotional themes which are difficult to put into words.

The young gay man who spoke to me about intimacy and sex in the chapter entitled “coming out, intimacy, relationships and marriage” told me about “Emo” culture, possibly in the context of things which people do not wish to think about. From my limited understanding, gay people could find some self-expression through Emo culture, without addressing inner conflicts with their sexual preferences. However, being an Emo does not necessarily mean that a person is gay. In a similar way, people with a tendency to engage in self-harm could find a way of coping through Emo culture. Correspondingly, people could blame Emo culture for incidents of actual self-harm or suicide, whether or not it was encouraged or stimulated by Emo culture. In my opinion, the same positive or negative arguments could be made with Punk or Goth cultures, both of which also have music as important components. Without drawing any conclusion about whether or not these cultures are more good than bad or bad than good, they all allow the thoughtful person to look deeply into human needs.

Just as I wrote about the television shows Jersey Shore and Geordie Shore in the section on intimacy in the previous chapter just mentioned, Emo, Punk and Goth cultures all point to areas of difficulty or confusion for people. These are areas which should be addressed if one wishes to promote good mental health and deal constructively with self-harm, including suicide.

For good mental health and to reduce self-harm and suicide, I think that people need to think about the things that people in general do not wish to think about, where they concern the deepest human needs. If social norms do not allow this within a culture then it is necessary to modify social norms so that they ultimately reflect human needs constructively, in my opinion. One such need is sexual preference, which can be gay or straight. However, there are others and some may be difficult to define, like shadows in fog or darkness. Possibly, in cases where there are broken families, love which wants nothing in return and is caring could be another human need. Perhaps individuals also might feel the need to trust someone else with anything, when they might feel that no-one can be trusted. Coping with the fear of death could be yet another need. Self-harm and suicide to some could seem to be courage in the face of death but do not necessarily address fear of death in order to permit any enjoyment of life. Although life itself can be thought of as a free gift for which one does not ask, such a notion has to be separated from any religious or moral overtones. It can always be easier to feel better about life when looking back. In writing these things, many could potentially feel that it takes more courage to continue to live than to die! There can also be fear of violence or possibly even fear of the enjoyment of violence. In my opinion, people can potentially withhold enjoyment of violence in order that others can be at peace, whether through sport, video games or other constructive means. In my opinion, honour does not have to be served violently. In many ways, humanity is full of needs.

Whether or not the reader now thinks the author is totally mad, the dark things in human nature must be addressed so that fewer people feel compelled or tempted to harm themselves in any way, regardless as to whether self-harm itself might make some people doing this feel better later! This includes those actions which are final in this lifetime, or those which can give some people (such as their loved ones) sorrow for the rest of their lives. An attempt at suicide may not always kill a person but can leave him or her disabled for life, even if intended to cause death. In my own case, as undoubtedly that of others, I was lucky. Like the butterfly which emerges from the cocoon, so often appearing to be a symbol of mental growth and health, inner happiness and contentment can always potentially arise from the darkest moments.

Mental health needs and achieving good mental health

Somewhat inadequately prepared to write about the factors required for people to be mentally healthy, I shall do so here. In the chapter entitled “looking good on a low budget” I introduced a mnemonic for health and beauty in the form of a triangle. At the top of the triangle, I placed “positive mental attitude, sense of purpose and meaning in life”. This was discussed in some detail, so I shall not repeat myself here. However, if a person can do this, then it can be assumed that he or she has reasonable mental health. To focus on achieving good mental health, it is first important to look at the activities or properties required.

There is an enormous volume of literature concerning mental health on which I am not an expert. There are many theories of psychology which can be used to approach the topic of mental health. No doubt all have their merits. One theory which I find is relatively simple to grasp and very useful is Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs,⁶⁰ which is found in summarised form in many textbooks on psychology and other sources. It is part of humanistic psychology which attempts to explain human motivation.



According to Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, human needs are motivating and are assigned to five levels which can be viewed in the form of a triangle or pyramid. Higher needs are not addressed by individuals until lower needs are met, normally at least in part. Therefore, as needs are depicted as being met from the base and proceeding upwards, they are hierarchical (can be assigned an order according to the level).

The lowest needs demanding the most attention to satisfy are termed "physiological", such as thirst, hunger and sex. Should these needs at least be partially satisfied, then the second level of needs becomes more motivating, called "safety". These needs provide security and stability. Satisfying them eases threats due to living in the world, promotes predictability and helps cope during emergencies or a mental health problem. Income (such as due to a job) and insurance are examples which satisfy this level of needs. Religion, science and philosophy can also be seen to satisfy needs for safety to some extent because they create a sense of order.

Moving up the hierarchy is the set of needs called "love" which might more appropriately be specified to be love associated with affection and a sense of belonging. Having friends or a loving partner would address this category of needs. Although sex is classed as part of the lowest set of needs ("physiological") in this theory, it is governed by other needs; mainly that of affection associated with love, which must be given and received. Should this third set of needs be satisfied at least somewhat, one moves up to the second last set of human needs, that termed "esteem". Needs at this level apply equally to those satisfied by interaction with others and those involving the self alone. Hence included are respect by others, attention from others and prestige; and needs satisfied by the self, potentially in response to interaction with others, namely self-esteem or self-respect. As in real life, theories have complicating factors. For example, an individual who appears to be exceptionally confident and with good self-esteem may be trying to satisfy the lower and more basic need for love instead of (self-) esteem, in order to attract love (affection). Should the lower four levels of needs at least be partially satisfied, then an individual is supposed to be motivated to satisfy the top level of needs, termed "selfactualisation". This is where a person will try to achieve his or her human potential. For example, an artist would try to create a work of art. However, such needs do not have to be materialistic, an example being the wish to be a good mother. This level of needs is not necessarily dependent on others and can be in opposition to other people (such as actions of heroes or saints). None-the-less, it should represent the best or healthiest aspects of humanity. Philanthropy or humanitarian work is consistent with satisfying needs at this level. The modern "Western" culture appears to be suited to hierarchical thinking. Hence, higher needs can be thought of as better than lower needs from a cultural perspective.

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs was originally intended to be independent of cultural influences, hence truly human. An unhealthy person, at least mentally, would thus be dominated by more basic needs rather than be motivated to fulfil his or her human potential. In contrast, a mentally healthy person according to this theory is mainly motivated to fulfil what he or she is capable of in a positive sense. In my opinion, one can view all five of the assigned levels as important for health. Rather than make judgements as to levels being better or worse, one can accept them as important for mental health and strive to satisfy all five sets of needs. It would be like the mistake of asking whether the body or the mind is more important, when both are important for life. Using this theory as a guide for mental health, a person can identify an area of his or her life which could be contributing to poor mental health, if a person has symptoms of this. Otherwise, a person can use whatever constructive means are available in his or her experience to be fully satisfied in life, beyond the explanations of this theory.

For a completely healthy person, trying to derive benefit from such a view of mental health could potentially be thought of as simplistic and merely stating the obvious. In my opinion, when applying theories to one's own life it is best to keep what is useful and reject what is not. Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs is presented as a simple model of mental health, allowing one to bypass the complicating influence of culture, modern "Western" or other.

One issue concerning assessment of one's own mental health by oneself in order to ensure that it is good, is that one's own viewpoint is self-referring. By this process, sanity and insanity are determined merely by points of view. Certain mental health problems of a person can affect the view of the world of the individual. Other people could intervene without success because people usually tend to assume they are right, in my opinion. Furthermore, progress to gain mental health is most likely if a person really wants this for him- or herself, whether or not a condition is serious. Hence, this can be compared to addiction to recreational drugs, discussed in the previous chapter entitled "drugs, including alcohol and the genetic lottery". If a person knows that something is wrong but cannot discover the problem, it does not help to try to think it through because mental health can alter viewpoints. To decide whether a problem is serious or not, even before seeking professional advice, a person can see what effect it has on others. Even when feeling confused, one can assume a problem is serious if it has a bad effect on others, even if this is not always the case. In my opinion, those problems which cause suffering to an individual which have the worst effect on others should be dealt with first. However, in writing about altered viewpoints of life as if they were bad, I must acknowledge that a portion of the beautiful writing, art and music I have enjoyed may have arisen from creativity at the border of so-called sanity and insanity. Were it to be derived from true insanity, the writer or artist may have been prevented from producing his or her work before I or anyone else had a chance to admire it. Indeed, what is considered to be sane or insane (such as religious beliefs or one man marrying many wives), is to a great extent determined by culture.

In the previous chapter just mentioned, in the section with the heading "the selfmedication hypothesis", the concept was introduced of choosing recreational drugs which make a person with a potential mental health condition feel better. Hence, a person with a potential mental health condition may be using recreational drugs (including alcohol) which can at least partially restore an imbalance of neurotransmitters occurring in a mental health condition.^{5,46} This concept was not discussed in order to insult people but to enable an individual to assess whether or not he or she could have a mental health condition and thus seek treatment. Proper therapy for a mental health condition would allow a person to gain mental health without needing to use recreational drugs and could assist in overcoming any recreational drug habit which could otherwise be difficult. Even though this theory is controversial, it may be helpful for certain people wishing to attain good mental health, hence it is being mentioned in this section.

Before discussing diagnosis and treatment of mental health conditions in the next section, it can be helpful to comment on how to achieve mental health generally from my own point of view, assuming it is reasonably aligned with reality! Having had only minor mental health problems before, those affecting mood, it can be difficult to comment on more serious problems and those which dramatically alter awareness of reality. None-the-less, a few points can be of advantage. Firstly, a person with poor mental health should be kind to him- or herself. This is in opposition to hating or blaming oneself. While attempting to improve mental health, with or without professional help, a person needs to be determined. However, progress is not always smooth.



There may be good and bad times, for days, weeks or even months. A person should be patient when times are bad and courageous and committed to improving when times are good. Secondly, a person should keep a positive attitude to the extent which is possible. Negative thinking should gradually be replaced with positive thoughts and tormented feelings or the lack of positive feelings should be bravely endured until they can be eased as mental health is slowly achieved. Here, it can be helpful to believe in oneself and the possibility to have mental health. In my opinion, it can be helpful to have a positive goal to aim for which unifies one's constructive efforts. Finally, a person should be humble and willing to accept the support of people who truly care, including professionals. It is not always possible to achieve good mental health alone and support along the path to a happy and healthy life is a fortunate bonus.

Mental health diagnosis and treatment

At the beginning of the previous section I presented Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs⁶⁰ as a simple model for mental health and its requirements. This was done to help readers, rather than merely to review the extensive literature in a manner which could be thought of as boring by some people. Similarly, I wish to consider the identification of specific mental health conditions (diagnosis) and how to treat them.

There are a great number of theories on mental health treatment. Rather than cover this topic from all sides, as is necessary when doing research, I wish to distinguish some helpful concepts and methods which can be used to improve mental health. Even if these may not be the best to achieve mental health, they can be practical to make progress.

As mental health treatment by a professional can be complicated, improvement may be due more to skill and the intuition of a practitioner than a strict application of science. This does not mean that a psychiatrist, clinical psychologist, counsellor or other health professional is not treating according to clearly defined methods which he or she has been trained to use. It means that a person who has a mental health condition must find a reliable practitioner whom he or she trusts and cooperate with this health professional, when neatly defined ways to bring about improvement are not always clear. Just as in literature, music or fine arts, achievement can more be due to art than science. This does not mean that training in mental health is useless. Rather, such training should be viewed as a starting point.

One advantage of research is that it can provide explanations of how and why treatments work, which are historically known to do so but without a specific reason. Whether this is applied to the use of a so-called "mood stabiliser", such as lithium for bipolar spectrum disorders ("manic depression"), or Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) to treat conditions such as chronic gastric reflux and arthritis, benefits can precede a proper scientific explanation. This does not mean that people should be unwilling to use a safe treatment because its action cannot be fully understood, even if there were individuals who might think so under the guise of ethical conduct. As research progresses, reasons for methods known to be relatively safe and successful are gradually supplied, along with better treatments. In my opinion, health professions must truly put the patient first apart from any politics or rhetoric, to be fully ethical. None-the-less, the area of medical ethics is full of noble intentions and deserves great respect and admiration, in my opinion.

Treatment of a mental health condition usually depends on a correct diagnosis, which then determines medications and methods of therapy which can be used. Diagnosis of mental health conditions can be complicated due to so-called “comorbidity”; namely, the occurrence of different mental health conditions in one individual. Here, diagnosis is not made to label a person and give him or her a stigma but to choose between one of potentially many methods of treatment. For example, a person may have “unipolar” depression (“major depression”) or a form of “bipolar” depression (manic depression). A person with unipolar depression can be treated with standard antidepressants but someone with bipolar depression might need additional or alternative medications (such as lithium or another mood stabiliser) and the timing of giving these medications may be important. Should there be general anxiety present, it might be necessary to add a benzodiazepine drug (“minor” as distinguished from major tranquiliser). Although a decision between two categories of depression might seem to be simple, making it correctly can save lives, which could otherwise be lost due to suicide.^{5,58} To make such decisions, various medically approved and validated tests are available. However, it is difficult to use them because there are many different mental health conditions. Although they appear to occur in clusters, such as unipolar depression as opposed to bipolar spectrum disorders, diagnosis is complicated. Fortunately, research is always leading to better diagnoses.

An example would be Global Mind Screen.⁶¹⁻⁶³ Although not yet validated against approved tests, it uses a computer-based questionnaire drawing from a pool of more than 400 questions to assess 30 or more mental health conditions. Questions answered by someone doing this test prompt further questions. This assessment test can be done within 30 minutes. While not yet recognised to provide an official diagnosis, such a method can help medical doctors treat patients, especially difficult cases which appear to be resistant to treatment. Previously, I used the Mind Screen[®] to satisfy my curiosity and was amazed at its potential.

Another test which can assist the process of making a diagnosis, also being able to be used together with Global Mind Screen, is Single-Photon Emission Computerised Tomography (SPECT).⁶¹⁻⁶⁵ SPECT is a medical imaging method which was developed many years ago and is used to analyse function in specific regions of the brain. Biomarkers are biological molecules or properties which indicate the health status of an individual. The discovery of new biomarkers to assist in diagnosing and treating different mental health conditions could eventually enable personalised treatment.⁶⁵ Such biomarkers can be used together with medical imaging techniques such as SPECT. Furthermore, research in the field of genetics should allow more biomarkers to be developed in future to help in diagnosis and treatment of mental health conditions. It is pleasing that research can provide more methods to assist the mental health professional in the practise of his or her art. Improved diagnostic methods, as well as a more accepting attitude to mental health conditions can lead to earlier diagnoses. Among other advantages, this is important to reduce the risk that a mental health problem develops to the stage where it is difficult to treat. It also means that the course of treatment can be shorter and the risk that a given condition returns is less.

The major treatment methods of mental health conditions are through use of medicines and counselling which will be discussed in this chapter. However, there are other methods of treatment. It is practical to rely on a trusted mental health professional to help where standard treatments do not seem to work, or to refer a client to another mental health professional with more specialised skills and knowledge. Further discussion of mental health treatment methods is beyond the scope of this book. None-the-less, it is important to acknowledge that there is ongoing development of new and better ways to diagnose and treat mental health problems for those who continue to look for treatment solutions.



Treatment of mental health conditions with medications

A very important way of treating mental health conditions is with medicinal drugs, in other words, pharmacological treatment. As written earlier, this is largely dependent on the practitioner rather than specifically dictated but can nevertheless be very effective, even when the diagnosis is complicated. In fact, the early development of drug treatment for mental health conditions such as depression was more due to careful observation of patients under treatment and thoughtful deductions than thorough experimentation. The use of medications has allowed many people to lead more normal lives, some of whom might otherwise remain in psychiatric institutions, such as people with schizophrenia and other psychoses.

It is possible for medicinal drug treatment of mental health conditions to be more scientifically approached than simply due to skilled judgement. In a process which can be controversial, it is possible to make diagnoses based on brain circuits for various neurotransmitters which function poorly or could be damaged.⁵ In order to do this each symptom must be considered separately and a corresponding neurotransmitter circuit identified, among a number of neurotransmitter circuits.

Then a medicinal drug combination treatment must be chosen to restore the imbalance in all neurotransmitter circuits affected. This process may involve changes in medications known to modify each circuit in turn until a patient is free of symptoms and feels better. Another point to be considered is whether or not to use medicinal drugs in the first place. Modern “Western” culture is not suited to assist a number of mentally healthy processes, including grieving which may follow a loss, such as that of a loved one through death. Some depression may naturally follow a loss and can be part of the normal grieving process. Culturally, a grieving person may be denied a good opportunity to come to terms with the loss or be discouraged from grieving properly (even if this is not deliberate). While a ceremony such as a funeral can help, much more may be needed. This was already discussed in the section on depression in the previous chapter (medical and bodily health issues and alternative medicine). Anyway, pharmacological treatment of mental health conditions needs to be considered together with other approaches which do not require medicinal drugs.

Although medicinal drug treatment of mental health conditions is essential for a number of mental health conditions, it may not be straightforward. Unpleasant side effects can result, even if not as bad as the condition itself. Treatment of schizophrenia with medications can illustrate the nature of this as a problem and how difficult it is to avoid. Positive and negative symptoms in schizophrenia were mentioned earlier in this chapter. Most antipsychotic drugs used to treat schizophrenia target one type of dopamine receptor (D2).^{5,41} This receptor is widely distributed throughout the brain. This means that regions of the brain are activated by the drug(s) which should ideally remain unaffected by treatment. Furthermore, the balance of positive and negative symptoms varies between schizophrenia patients.

Hence, while reducing negative symptoms in one region of the brain, positive symptoms in another region can be increased by the same drug and also the other way around. Unpleasant side effects of antipsychotic drugs include so-called “extrapyramidal symptoms”, which are involuntary movements caused by prolonged treatment with antipsychotics. These illustrate a common problem with current drug treatment.

Extrapyramidal symptoms occur because the same type of dopamine receptor (D2) targeted to treat positive and negative symptoms of schizophrenia is also involved in neurotransmitter circuits in the brain for movement (motor control). It is to be hoped that earlier diagnoses and better medicinal drugs (individually or in combinations) will result in fewer unpleasant side effects, where their use is necessary or advisable.

Mental health treatment based on counselling, the importance of communication and the role of the unconscious

Other than use of medicinal drugs to treat mental health conditions, counselling is a major way to address problems. Earlier in this chapter I have mentioned that I had treatment by a psychiatrist for problems during my teenage years while at high school. Essentially, during this time most of the treatment consisted of counselling and medication used was minimal. In my adult years I have also seen psychiatrists at times for problems which were probably related to stress. For example, my attempted suicide while aged 21 led to consultations with a psychiatrist. Although I am sure that counselling can be effective, it may not be necessary; where another treatment is preferred. Nonetheless, a person with a mental health condition would benefit from advice by a mental health professional trusted by him or her.

Counselling is performed by a number of different health professionals, with different titles for their work role. They include psychiatrists, clinical psychologists, social workers and counsellors by various titles; for example, marriage counsellors, relationship counsellors, family counsellors, grief counsellors and drug counsellors. If a person with a mental health condition is certain that he or she requires counselling, confusion may arise over which professional to consult. Any counselling may be better than none and expense may also be an issue.

As I have written in the section on addiction treatment of the chapter concerning recreational drug use, counselling is best left to a professional. This is important for a number of reasons, including that it is more likely to be successful. Although violence is unlikely, it can be a risk in mental health counselling, such as of patients with schizophrenia or other psychosis. Although overtreatment is unnecessary, it would be unhelpful to avoid seeing a psychiatrist due to the stigma associated with doing this of being considered to be mentally ill. In my opinion, it is best to seek the appropriate professional to help. If a particular mental health professional is responsible (as expected) and not the appropriate person to treat someone, then this person should suggest another professional who would be more appropriate.

The most important consideration may be whether or not the problem is only psychological or of the body and thus is potentially medical in nature, although it can be both mental and physical. For medical problems it is best to see a psychiatrist, who has been trained in medicine in addition to psychology.

Here it is helpful to provide some examples of mental health conditions which can potentially be associated with medical problems, often not clear before an individual consults a mental health professional. Mental health conditions can sometimes be associated with symptoms of pain in various regions of the body with no apparent cause. However, such pain is definitely unpleasant and not just in the imagination of a person who suffers from it. As it is commonly associated with depression, this was mentioned in the section on depression of the chapter on medical and bodily health issues.



Unfortunately, pain can sometimes result in people making many fruitless visits to medical doctors and other health professionals without training in psychology. Should such a person consult a psychiatrist, a diagnosis of a mental health condition could be made. Alternatively, a psychiatrist could exclude a mental health condition and suggest alternative diagnoses, such as fibromyalgia or nerve pain associated with diabetes. A psychologist could not be expected to be good at recognising non-psychological conditions which cause physical pain. A further advantage of a psychiatrist is that he or she should have a great deal of expertise in medicinal drug treatment. With both mental health conditions and pain syndromes of a purely psychological nature but definitely real, a number of types of medications can be used to provide pain relief, where standard pain relief medication would not work. These medicinal drugs include several types of antidepressants (with actions on different neurotransmitter circuits) but there are other potentially effective types of drugs. Exercise may potentially also be helpful.^{5,66,67}

Other examples of mental health conditions associated with medical problems are various so-called “eating disorders”. A person may eat compulsively, where addiction to food is a problem. Although for a person who does this, the problem might not necessarily be the food which is being craved but feelings satisfied by food. Food might be comforting for a person with troubled emotions. Obesity due to overeating can result in medical problems which a professional must be able to address. If not, death may occur prematurely due to cardiovascular problems and other medical conditions (such as diabetes). Being underweight can also cause health problems in men and women, such as death due to heart failure, or weak bones (osteoporosis). As a rough guide, a body mass index (BMI) of less than 18.5 in an adult is too low,^{32,34} even if the timing of development of health problems is uncertain as a person becomes increasingly thinner. Although this book has an adult focus, for determining BMI in very thin children it is essential to use the Centres of Disease Control and Prevention (USA) (CDC) Growth Charts, rather than the BMI equation discussed in the BMI section of the chapter entitled “looking good on a low budget”.^{33,34} A low BMI can arise due to the eating disorders of anorexia nervosa or bulimia nervosa, where people eat too little or too much also followed by induced vomiting, respectively.

These are recognised to be mental health conditions which might be related to anxiety or so-called “obsessive-compulsive disorders”. With these conditions, a person has an unrealistic body image and there can be other problems. These conditions are treatable and associated medical issues due to being underweight should be considered.

In my opinion, communication itself is incredibly important to prevent and reduce mental health conditions. No doubt, counselling can function this way. Furthermore, it is probably more effective if a patient has a personal affinity with his or her counsellor and does not participate grudgingly and with a lack of trust. Indeed, any enjoyable social activity may help a person with a mental health condition. Some patients may have already lost all their friends. A potential reason to neglect the role of counselling may be an assumption that a particular mental health condition is only due to genetic factors and cannot be influenced by communication. Not only is it now understood that many mental health conditions are due to genetic factors and the environment but that the unconscious mind has a major role in mental health. Therefore, mental health problems can be improved by interaction with a counsellor but an appropriately trained mental health professional must decide whether medications are helpful or necessary.

The functions of the mind are those which are conscious (of which a person is aware) and unconscious (occurring without awareness). Great contributions to the role of the unconscious in psychology were made by Sigmund Freud over a century ago, which founded the discipline of psychoanalysis.⁶⁸ Through conversations with a psychoanalyst, including analysis of dreams (sleep being an unconscious state), conflict between the conscious and unconscious mind can be identified. This can allow resolution of conflicts causing mental health conditions. Gaining insight into the source of a conflict by a patient is an important process in psychotherapy. An example of an action causing such conflict is sexual repression, where forbidden thoughts and feelings are repressed (into the unconscious). With taboos surrounding sexual preference, one can imagine how such repression can occur. For example, if a gay person routinely denies such thoughts and feelings, anxiety or other mental health problems can result. Life can be complicated and there are many other possibilities for mental conflict, regardless of the sexual preference of an individual. Modern neuroscience can benefit tremendously from a better understanding of the role of the unconscious in brain function, such as how unconscious memories are formed (which may surface in dreams or psychotherapy), regardless of how experts now view psychoanalysis. Although much is known about the mind, its ability to heal seemingly by itself is truly remarkable.



Chapter 12 : Spiritual matters

- such as the search for purpose and meaning, religion and self-empowerment

In the chapter on health and beauty, at the top of the triangle diagram I used to help remember the major healthy practices, I had “positive mental attitude, sense of purpose and meaning in life”. In addition to discussing this in the context of mental health, I wish to explain it here in a spiritual context. Although discussing sex and religion can make enemies, I wish to explore aspects of spirituality and religion here because it was a major area of concern among people I spoke to at the stage where I was planning this book and when I was already writing it in the taxi while waiting on ranks. Religion seems to disturb many people who are gay or who wish to make constructive choices relating to their sexuality or sexual preferences. However, I believe that it does not need to worry people. The purpose of this chapter is to put spiritual matters in a perspective in which they can be used for positive change and satisfaction in life.

On topics of spirituality and religion, all should be entitled to their own opinion or none, if they choose to. Of course, I am not going to assert my views over others. Therefore, there is no need to feel threatened. Some people may have strong beliefs or feel obligated to defend others, such as friends or relatives with strong views. Opinions on spirituality and religion are associated with other beliefs and values, for example relating to politics or a strong and healthy family unit. However, I think that matters of faith can be isolated from opinions on other topics. They do not automatically have to be considered together without question. Many people would not question the advantages of a family who are caring and are close, emotionally. Traditionally, a religion such as Roman Catholicism supports the concept of a strong family unit. Divorce is shunned and sex outside marriage is considered bad. Therefore, any topic which could threaten the faith of a person who chooses to be Catholic could be seen to threaten the sanctity of the family unit. I believe that this fear is not necessary. Spirituality and religion can be used to help people live their lives with love and faith. When living a life with such constructive values, other positive beliefs are naturally maintained, such as the importance of a happy family life. Therefore, rather than seeing views and choices in life as necessarily bound together like links in a chain, I see them as unlinked units, like building blocks to be arranged as a person chooses or like threads in a beautiful tapestry of many colours.

Faith, agnosticism and atheism: Believing whether or not there a God

Spirituality and religion are about beliefs. It is just as difficult to prove the existence of God, hence to support the view of faith in God, as it is to disprove that God exists and share the view of an atheist. An agnostic, who neither believes nor disbelieves in God is not committed to an act of faith in God or the absence of God. The difficulty (some might say impossibility) of proving that God does or does not exist means that the opinion of all should be respected. However, there are advantages of each viewpoint. An advantage of atheism is that religious views or arguments cannot be used to force an atheist to act in a certain way. The atheist simply does not regard the views as valid. An advantage of belief in God is that it can make life more comfortable, providing solutions for problems which could cause worry or anxiety. For example, people may worry about what can happen after they die or be unhappy that they might cease to exist.

A person who believes in God and the existence of heaven might have faith that he or she will live on in heaven after death, removing any worry. Therefore, rather than starting to approach the topic of spiritual matters by asserting my beliefs, I wish to acknowledge that all views have their advantages and disadvantages.

Spirituality as part of a healthy life

Given that a belief in God can be a matter of personal choice, it follows to consider how this can be involved in health and how one can use a belief constructively. Believing that life has a purpose and is meaningful relieves anxiety and reduces stress. Spirituality is more general than religion. It concerns the concept of something not directly part of the reality of the matter of the physical world, perhaps more like a type of energy. Whereas religion supposes that this is more clearly defined, as one or more powers or beings. To make things more complicated, individuals can approach spirituality or religion from their own cultural perspective, with or without an existing belief.

Instead of proceeding from spirituality or religion itself, I wish to start from where a person may wish to end up. In other words, people would normally wish to be healthy and happy and have love in their lives. This requires a constructive viewpoint, which maximises contentment and love and minimises worry and fear. A positive mental attitude which is consistent with this viewpoint can direct a life which is healthy and enables a person to enjoy life to the fullest extent. In my opinion, attributing purpose and meaning to life makes this possible. In a sense, this is easier than being healthy by obtaining regular exercise or eating well. The only activity required is mental, that of having an opinion. This means forming one's own views on spirituality or religion in a way that is going to enhance one's life.

Self-empowerment

There is not necessarily a right or wrong spiritual belief. Quite possibly, a reader may not yet have thought about having a spiritual belief. Here, I am not encouraging heresy but self-empowerment. One should give oneself the right to choose beliefs of a spiritual nature. If a reader already has spiritual or religious views and they are in conflict with aspects of his or her life, then it is necessary to resolve this.

Many people I spoke to in the taxi on my night-shifts thought that religion was an area of concern for people coming to terms with being gay, or who were gay and wanted to enjoy their lives. In my opinion, self-empowerment is necessary to turn destructive beliefs into constructive faith viewpoints. It is not necessary to reject religion or spirituality but rather to examine it carefully. Fortunately, freedom to believe means giving oneself the power to choose beliefs that are consistent with a healthy life.

How to find purpose and meaning if one cannot see it

Before discussing religion itself and trying to resolve potential conflicts with gay sexual preferences in this chapter, I wish to consider purpose and meaning. In my opinion, it is more urgent to have a sense of purpose and meaning in order to be in control of a healthy life and balance activities accordingly. Hopefully, readers who already have this will be patient. It is difficult to have a sense of purpose and meaning if one thinks of life as empty of anything meaningful, or if one has a great deal of worry and fear about life or the future.



With belief, one can act as if one already has faith. One does not need to have it. Then gradually faith can increase in one's life. Rather than doubt that there is meaning in life or just accept the opinions of others, one can question and look for things in which to believe. In my opinion, there are good reasons to assume that life is purposeful and meaningful. For a start, it can make life better and healthier, which is obviously a good reason. However, there are other reasons to develop a spiritual dimension to life.

As I have previously mentioned, I have been interested in science since I was a child. One reason for this was curiosity about meaning within the universe and wonder at its purpose.

A good aspect of science is its reliance on facts and experimentation. Data allows new experiments to be designed to formulate better theories. These theories then give meaning to facts. Theoretically, science is incapable of being controlled by the whims of others, where no logic is being used. Just as spirituality and religion are employed in a search for the truth, so is science.

One may not see purpose and meaning in life but one can start by looking at physical reality. There are many concepts which are logical and finite, having clear limits. For example, there are a certain number of atoms which make up the earth and surrounding atmosphere. These atoms could be counted, if one had the means. There is also a minimum temperature (absolute zero), when vibration of atoms and molecules (made of atoms) is least. However, there are other concepts due to science, which provide a reason for a spiritual dimension to life. Contemplating the infinite through science can lead a person to awareness of God, even if this is not actually proof.

An example is thinking about the size of the universe, as it is infinite or without end (at least space itself). Another example would be the beginning of time itself (eternity is infinite). With time to think about concepts related to science, a number of possibilities can be imagined, even without a good education.

To find purpose and meaning in life, I think that it helps to view the universe with a sense of wonder. This is perhaps easier when contemplating nature. Life itself is amazingly well-ordered. In my opinion, it is difficult to believe that this can have arisen just by chance, with no purpose and totally meaningless. However, I am biased because I view life with a sense of faith. Indeed, I have discussed this with scientists who take the opposite view to me; that the natural world one can observe is simple due to random events. Finding purpose and meaning in life is lifeenhancing, in my opinion. Certainly, observing nature or finding out more about it can help to arouse a sense of purpose and meaning. If one is unable to sense this but wants to, then it helps to cultivate a sense of wonder or amazement. If this is difficult, then one can try to cultivate curiosity. By deliberately trying to take an interest in nature (or other aspects of the universe) or even science itself, I think that one can become more curious (wanting to know more). Faith in a purpose for and meaning to life can develop from this.

Following a spiritual or religious path

It takes a great deal of commitment to engage in spiritual or religious practices compared with simply finding purpose and meaning in life. However, for many it is a natural progression. Alternatively, one could assume that spiritual or religious pathways are in error and believe that in not being committed, one is closer to the Truth. In line with this is a quotation from a book of ancient Chinese philosophy which I like. Tao means “the Way”.

The Tao that can be spoken is not the eternal Tao,

The name that can be named is not the eternal name.¹

In other words the Truth is beyond definition. However, this is not useful because one has no way of approaching the Truth. This is why a seeker who is searching for the Truth (like myself) needs a spiritual or religious pathway to follow. It helps him or her find a way to the Truth, hence is useful.

If a person wishes to know which spiritual or religious path to follow, I do not think that it is easy to make a decision. Of course, the influence of family, friends and culture may determine which path to follow. Anyway, I believe that a spiritual or religious path must be constructive, rather than destructive. It can be helpful to find a path which matches well with one’s own personality, such as “Eastern” versus “Western”.

In any case, it is helpful to read and find out more about different paths. It is also beneficial to speak to people who follow a particular spiritual path or religion in which one is interested, certainly before committing oneself to it or joining a spiritual or religious group, or church. Indeed, there are churches for gay people specifically, such as the Metropolitan Community Churches (MCC).⁶⁹ Whatever decision one makes, it is always possible to leave a group if one is unhappy. For example, if practices make one feel uncomfortable, one suspects fraud, or money is being unfairly sought from members. None-the-less, the choice to follow a spiritual or religious path can bring a great deal of satisfaction, based on the experience of myself and others.

Religion and being gay

Although this is the last section of this chapter, coping with religion by a gay person was an issue of great importance among passengers with whom I had conversations on my taxi night-shifts. Although I like spirituality very much and can accept being gay, I do not have a conflict between religion and being gay. However, I did in the past at different times in my life when I was much younger. Therefore, I can sympathise with gay people having difficulties in dealing with inner religious conflict or simply religious views. This section was not included earlier in this chapter because spirituality, finding purpose and meaning in life and possibly also choosing a form of spiritual expression or a religion to practise can all be important for health and to enjoy life to the full. In my opinion, addressing these issues can induce positive change more easily than simply addressing inner religious conflict or trouble with religious opinions. Furthermore, by showing how one can develop a spiritual dimension (openness to the Truth) or awareness of God, should a reader want to have faith, it is easier to deal with issues of religion which trouble gay people.



Here, some people could scoff or doubt the capacity of religion to harm the conscience of people. Certain individuals, including atheists, may claim that by ignoring religion or invalidating it in one's life, it has no power to disturb one. Yet I do not underestimate the power of religion to trouble people, even those of sound mind and health who strive to lead a good life, whatever one may consider this to be. Religious feeling seems to be well-entrenched in humanity. One can observe it in the diversity of religious practices in cultures throughout the world. Indeed, during times of disaster or stress many people pray, quite possibly also those who are not religious. Therefore, an examination of gay identity and where it does or does not conflict with religion is important.

In this section I will mostly refer to the Christian religion, in particular Roman Catholicism, as I have more experience with these religions and am better acquainted with their scriptures rather than those of other religions. However, other religions attribute "love" as a major quality which God possesses, so Christianity is not unique in having a loving God. Indeed, considerations with respect to being gay could well be similar for different religions. Words in Christian religious writing concerning God and the responses of believers to God's love include peace, joy, faith, compassion, hope, mercy, justice and forgiveness. The life and teachings of Jesus are central to Christianity. These are described in the four standard Gospels of the Bible; namely Matthew, Mark, Luke and John.²¹

In spite of assuming that the Bible may be subject to interpretation, for the purposes of this book I can suggest that anyone with inner conflict related to Christianity or Roman Catholicism might simply read a little of any of the four Gospels.

One does not need to read very much to discover that Jesus of the Gospels is humble and kind, yet also shrewd in dealing with the affairs of the world. Of course, I do not like to quote scripture in my book because then I can be regarded as preaching, which would not be appropriate or helpful. However, a little scripture is important here because some people may be unfamiliar with it and religion was deemed an area of concern for gay people. An example of shrewdness displayed by Jesus is his response when being trapped as to whether or not it was right to pay taxes to Caesar (Israel was occupied by the Romans, led by the Emperor "Caesar"). Jesus asked to be shown a coin, which had the image and name of Caesar on it, so he said, "...render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's." (Matthew 22:21; Mark 12:17; Luke 20:25)²¹ In the Bible, Jesus is well known for quoting from the scripture written before his own birth, "...You shall love your neighbour as yourself." (Matthew 22:39; Mark 12:31; Luke 10:27)²¹ Another quotation in the Bible by him of previous scripture is, "So whatever you wish that others would do to you, do also to them, for this is the Law and the Prophets." (Matthew 7:12)²¹ The parable of the Good Samaritan by Jesus might be good to quote here but it is too long to quote and the historical context might need an explanation. This parable can easily be found in a Bible (Luke 10:25-37)²¹ if a reader is keen. Basically, the person least expected to, was the one who helped his neighbour. Maybe surprisingly, given the potential for inner conflict with religion for a gay person, Jesus does not condemn homosexuality in any of the four Gospels of the standard Christian Bible!

Indeed, a book which I have read and found helpful is called *The Five Gospels*.⁷⁰ The fifth one is the Gospel of Thomas. He was one of the 12 disciples of Jesus, the Apostle also known as "the Twin" (John 20:24).²¹ The book was written after a group of biblical scholars who had trained and worked at institutions of various denominations, all familiar with the original ancient texts of Christian scriptures, cast votes for each verse in the five Gospels as to whether Jesus was likely to have said it or not. According to how likely Jesus was to have actually said each verse, they were colour-coded black, grey, pink or red (certainly said or in very similar words).

At this point, some people could object, given that the Bible and any authorised scripture is considered an inspired work and thus might be deemed literally correct. Here I cite *The Wicked* (also called *Sinners' or Adulterous Bible* in which, due to a printing error in Exodus 20:14 (by leaving out the word “not”) it was written, “Thou **shalt** commit adultery.”⁷¹

Of course, seekers like me wish to know what Jesus actually said and even how he looked (illogical though this is); paintings of Jesus often resemble different ethnic groups with which artists associated, although the true appearance of Jesus is unknown. The nature of Jesus of *The Five Gospels* is truly compassionate.

Obviously, I am not a spokesperson for any church or religion and no doubt others can potentially provide reasons why they consider it wrong to be gay; or if not, then just wrong to express it. In the next chapter, I wish to address the issue of whether or not a gay person has a choice to be gay. Even if I believe that there is no choice, absolute proof is still lacking. If a person has no choice, clearly it would be even more unfair to impose a straight lifestyle on a gay person. At present, the Roman Catholic Church does not approve of gay sex but it also does not approve of unjust discrimination against gay men and women.⁷² If a gay person tries not to express sexuality in any form, this can lead to lust. In my opinion, excessive lust is worse (more disturbing) than expression of being gay, whether in a gay marriage (not legally recognised in many countries), relationship or other forms. According to the Roman Catholic Church, sex is only for reproduction. Hence masturbation and homosexual acts and inclination are sinful. In my opinion, by emphasising reproduction there is a risk that the sex act between a man and a woman can be held holy above any noble feelings leading to it and mutual love and respect. This has the effect of diminishing spiritual values over sexual equipment (use of the organs of reproduction); much as the risk that a pagan symbol (Christmas tree [Jeremiah 10:2-4; Habakkuk 2:18-20]²¹) or date for festivities of the Saturnalia (25th December),⁷³ though these can be fun, could receive more attention than the messages of Jesus.

However, in the Bible it is written, “Judge not, that you be not judged.” (Matthew 7:1; Luke 6:37)²¹ This is certainly not something I wish to do and I bear no malice to any church or religion.

An analogy to the quest of spirituality and religion can be an obstacle course, where in order to feel at peace, a seeker must be wary and keep moving. Concerning spirituality, I am not in favour of hierarchical structures (top down), even if this can work well for an organisation or business. My preferred arrangement is like a circle, with the members of equal status to one another and all being welcome.



Chapter 13 : Exploring evidence against being gay by choice

- addressing discrimination based on a potentially false assumption that being gay is a matter of choice

This chapter assesses the likelihood that being gay is not due to personal choice. Although discrimination based on anything is considered morally wrong, the need is often felt to list forms of discrimination which are unfair and thus should not be carried out, as previously discussed in the chapter on career choices. Examples are race, colour, religious beliefs and being male or female. Were one to ask gay men or women who have grown to accept it, whether or not they chose to be gay, most would be likely to say no, in my opinion. A number of gay people have told me that although they married someone of the opposite sex in order to change their preference for the same sex, they remained gay. It can be thought that if it can be demonstrated beyond all reasonable doubt that being gay is not due to choice, then discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation will end. The Roman Catholic Church is still an influential organisation, even if their power was much greater hundreds of years ago. Even without the scientific proof that can satisfy sceptics, they consider being homosexual as not a matter of choice and also state that unjust discrimination against homosexual men and women is wrong!⁷² However, there are reasons for providing proof that a person does not choose to be gay, other than to end discrimination. For example, people may just be interested to know.

Having had a biomedical science background, I am in a position to consider the evidence for choosing to be gay as opposed to an inclination that resists efforts to change it. My education included a number of biomedical sciences, such as human genetics. Furthermore, I have also done biomedical research, including cancer research and that related to HIV/AIDS. Anyway, it so happens that I consider time and research money better spent on improving diagnosis and remedies for people with diseases than to provide more reasons for people not to discriminate against their fellow humans. It should not be necessary to divert resources just so that people should not ill-treat others. In my view and that of most others, I am sure, freedom from ill-treatment is a basic human right. In addition, by providing scientific evidence that being gay is not by choice I think that there is a risk that people could interfere with natural sexual preferences. Hence, treatments or interventions could be developed to ensure that babies born will not develop same-sex preferences later as adults. Whether or not such remedies might involve gene therapy or a simpler use of technology, I believe that discriminative attitudes (which can change) are not a sufficient reason to develop medical treatments or interventions to prevent gay sexual preferences. There is already enough suffering in the world that can be eased through use of present-day scientific and medical technology.

Undoubtedly, many will be curious about the existing evidence that people have no choice in their preferences for the same or opposite sex, so it is good to provide a selection of it in this chapter. Aptly, it follows the chapter on spiritual matters, as inner religious conflict can cause great suffering; if gay people were to understand that they have no choice, maybe they would suffer less. Current evidence is psychosocial (concerning the interaction of psychology and social factors), genetic, associated with the action of certain hormones (chemical messengers which can act at a distance in the body via the blood) and also related to anatomical differences in regions of the brain.

Psychosocial research example

Firstly, one can look at the changes in sexual identity with time to assess the extent to which this can change with time. It is to be understood that this is a controversial area with a need for conclusive research. Here, I can summarise an example of research from the scientific literature.

A study of reasonable size (of 156 youths) with almost equal numbers of males and females was done which required self-reporting by young people initially identifying themselves as gay (to simplify this summary by including “lesbian”) and bisexual; being repeated after six months and then after one year.⁷⁴ The ages of young people studied ranged from 14 to 21 years, with an average age of 18 years. In this study most individuals either retained their gay identity (57%), with only slightly more shifting from bisexual to gay (an additional 18%) versus remaining bisexual (an additional 15%) over the year-long study. Only 5% of young people changed to being straight and 5% of gay people changed to being bisexual, with 95% still being gay or bisexual at the end of the year-long study, showing consistency of same-sex preferences. Interestingly, it appeared to take longer for young bisexual people to clarify their sexual orientation.

Hormonal activity during development

An excellent review article arguing against freedom of choice to be gay discusses biological effects of hormones active during development of embryos.⁷⁵ It is suggested that hormones which are seen to affect sexual orientation in animals may have parallels in humans. This review also considers genetic studies and differences in the anatomy of brain regions. According to the author of the review article, the extent of psychological trauma and social problems experienced by many people who are not straight, provides added support to the scientific evidence that same-sex preferences (considering homo- and bisexual preferences together) are not by choice. Sexual preferences are seen to be under the control of many influences, including yet unknown gene(s), hormonal influences during development and environmental influences, in a manner which is not obvious and straightforward and would require much research to understand well.

In this review article⁷⁵ the author presents a model of brain alteration by the masculinising effect of the male sex hormone testosterone or by its absence, during the development of the embryo in the female uterus (womb) before birth. Varying levels of testosterone could induce same-sex preferences in males and females. Although acknowledged to be oversimplified in humans, evidence in support of such a model is cited. For example, the effects of male hormones in women during pregnancy on a particular finger ratio of the hand and effects on the anatomy of hearing. These effects are known to be hormone-dependent. Anatomical differences in certain small regions of male versus female brains were another example. Changes in similar brain regions are associated with differences in same-sex preferences in animal studies and these changes can result from the effects of hormones on animal embryos during development. Effects of abnormal sex hormone activity before birth (such as due to medical treatment or genetic problems) on same-sex preferences in humans were reviewed but such effects only give rise to a great increase in same-sex preferences, rather than explaining same-sex preferences of people completely. Social factors and those due to gender (male/female) differences induced by hormones active before birth complicate the analysis of differences in sexual preferences. However, the effects of changes in sex hormone levels in adults seem to make no difference to sexual preference according to the review author, supporting a role of hormonal activity in same-sex preferences before birth rather than afterwards.



The review also cites evidence for increases in same-sex preference by females with higher levels of female sex hormone (oestrogen or estrogen) before birth, suggesting that hormonal effects on same-sex preferences during development in the uterus are complicated (not just due to testosterone).

“Nature” (genetics) versus “nurture” (the environment)

Research on the fruit fly (*Drosophila*) has found a single gene (*fru* or *fruitless*) which can be swapped by scientists to cause same-sex preference during courtship by females given the male version of the gene.⁷⁶

However, in humans, genetic influences on being gay have been difficult to determine. Identical twins have the same genetic material in each cell, being derived from the same cell formed by the union of a male sperm and female egg cell (ovum) at fertilisation. In contrast, nonidentical twins are each derived from separate sperm and egg pairs which share the uterus of the mother, hence being genetically different. Therefore, scientists perform twin studies to compare genetic and environmental influences on different characteristics (traits). Twin studies have been performed to investigate homosexuality since the 1950s.⁷⁷ It is possible that no more than about 65% of identical male twins are both expected to be gay, where at least one of them is gay.⁷⁵ If 100% of identical twin pairs were gay, where one twin is gay, then one could assume that only genetics determined gay sexual preference but years of research have shown otherwise. Presumably, complex genetics have made it difficult to find gene(s) predisposing people to be gay. Therefore, it is likely that a number of genes and environmental influences are involved.

Although the search for genes involved in same-sex preference has not yielded good candidates, a recent large study suggests the existence of a number of genes on the female (X) sex chromosome, as opposed to the male (Y) sex chromosome.⁷⁸ Normal individuals have two chromosomes of each of 22 different types and XY if male or XX if female. Each chromosome is packed full of genetic material (DNA) containing numerous genes, each gene having the DNA plan (“blueprint”) to make one of many components the body requires or to regulate this process. Conflicting evidence implicates a region on the X chromosome in male same-sex preference (Xq28, at the end of the X chromosome long arm), which thus may or may not be involved. Time will tell. Reviews of this research are available.^{75,78}

The search for genes on the X chromosome which may be involved in male same-sex preference is complicated by the fraternal birth order effect (review available⁷⁹). A male has 33% higher chance of being gay for every brother who is born before him to the same mother. Hence, a gay male is more likely to result as the youngest son in a family with many brothers having the same biological mother (as opposed to a non-biological mother, such as a stepmother). As this is statistical, it only means it is more likely that the younger sons are gay. Thus there is no reason for finger-pointing in large families, at supposedly gay males implicated and suspected of not having come out! It is likely that the fraternal birth order effect is due to increasing levels of antibodies produced by the mother with each successive male birth. Antibodies are small proteins made by the immune system in response to something detected by the body as foreign, in case it is threatening (such as a virus, bacteria, fungus or parasite). Antibodies produced could possibly induce changes in the brain of a son during development, resulting in him being gay due to the fraternal birth order effect.

To determine any involvement of the X chromosome in genetics of male homosexuality, it was necessary to rule out the fraternal birth order effect (applying only to mothers and their gay sons). Hence, researchers studied maternal (mother's side) grandmothers and aunts of gay men in the recent large study mentioned earlier,⁷⁸ comparing findings to the paternal (father's side) grandmothers and aunts. On the paternal side, inheritance of the X chromosome was not involved (only the Y chromosome being passed on from father to son). The same research was also done with straight men to control for the data obtained for gay men, matching characteristics of the control individuals as much as was practical. A total of 2100 female relatives were in the study to enable potentially small differences to be determined as statistically significant. The maternal female relatives of the gay men were found to be more fertile (have more offspring) than the paternal female relatives or corresponding relatives of heterosexual controls. The conclusion could be drawn that there were genes on the X chromosome for male homosexuality which could balance increased fertility of the maternal relatives of a gay man carrying these genes; hence, explaining the research results of increased fertility of the maternal relatives balancing the reduced fertility of the gay men.

During evolution there could have been selection for such a gene combination, ensuring that such genes for male homosexuality would not disappear due to natural selection (generally not being passed on by gay males themselves).

Epigenetics

Recently, modifications of genes or effects on genes by regulatory factors have been considered to induce homosexuality. Such "epigenetics" do not involve changes to a DNA sequence, which is the chemical signature of DNA, corresponding to the plan or "blueprint" in a gene. Stem cells in embryos have the potential to develop into any other type of bodily cell. Within the embryo, epigenetic markers ("epi-marks") can make stem cells of males more sensitive and stem cells of females less sensitive to the male sex hormone, testosterone.⁸⁰ Although epi-marks should ensure that the effects of testosterone on developing cells in the embryo are stable to changing levels of the hormone and unexpected influences, changes in epi-mark dosage can result. Hence, during brain development, stem cells exposed to testosterone above or below a threshold could lead to same-sex preference. A potential role for testosterone during development in homosexuality has already been discussed.⁷⁵

Anatomy of brain regions

If one can accept that the genetics of homosexuality is complicated, it can be simpler to consider that there may be differences in regions of the brain in gay versus straight individuals. Although humans in general have very similar brain anatomy, including males versus females, small differences have been documented after scientific research.⁸¹ The hypothalamus is one of the lower regions of the brain, which is involved in sexual responses. A portion at the front of it (INAH-3) is smaller in gay men and straight women than in straight men. Another area of the hypothalamus (suprachiasmatic nucleus) which is involved in regulating sleep/wake cycles (circadian rhythms) is double the size in gay men as it is in straight men. In rat studies, blocking testosterone activity caused this area to be increased in size and led to bisexual behaviour.



Pheromones (chemical messengers acting via the sense of smell) have been shown to activate the hypothalamus differently in gay and straight men and women. Such compounds are released by glands under the armpits and can be considered to be one environmental influence on sexual behaviour. In the research on fruit flies mentioned earlier, which demonstrated that altering a single gene could induce same-sex preference, females produced a pheromone to attract males during courtship. The anterior commissure, connects certain regions of the left and right halves of the brain. This was reported to be bigger in gay versus straight men and is bigger in women versus men. Other differences in the brains of gay and straight people have also been reported.

However, even if regions of the brain are different in gay versus straight individuals, it is difficult to know which of these differences is responsible for same-sex preferences, or whether any or all are a result of them. This is the “chicken and egg” argument (over which came first).

Experiments such as the example just provided, blocking testosterone during rat brain development, suggest that same-sex preferences can result from differences in hormonal levels during brain development of gay versus straight people and can correspond to changes in brain regions.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have considered a number of factors which determine whether or not being gay (for a guy or a lady) is a matter of choice.

As I have found common in life, the more one investigates, the more complicated reality appears. This is certainly so when doing scientific research. The argument for or against being gay by choice is beyond a simple one, of “nature versus nurture” (or genetics versus the environment). The genetics of homosexuality are complicated, with research data suggesting that there could be a number of genes on the female sex (X) chromosome for same-sex preference in men. It is also possible that epigenetic factors can modify gene activity to induce same-sex preference. Environmental influences also appear to be involved and it is known that hormones active during development before birth cause same-sex preferences. Although differences in regions of the brain of gay versus straight men and women have been found, it is difficult to determine their significance. Psychosocial evidence suggests that being gay is not a matter of choice. Personal experience (my own and of others) also suggests no choice is made. However, as with anything I write, please do not just take my word without question. Rather, please think about the evidence yourself and draw your own conclusions as to whether or not being gay is likely to be a matter of choice; apart from any social influences at work which cause confusion.

None-the-less, due to the complexity of the factors involved in determining same-sex preference, it is likely that obtaining scientific proof beyond all reasonable doubt that gay people have no choice in their preference for the same sex will take a long time.

Meanwhile, I hope that people can live in peace with their differences without requiring scientific explanations to do so. Much more respectful conduct in general towards gay men and women can be seen now, when I compare the present and about 25 years ago, which indicates this is already happening.

Chapter 14 : The gay community and support organisations

The gay community can provide a sense of belonging. However, gay people can choose to come out and lead their lives without involvement in the gay community or other organisations to assist gay people. Internet-based technologies enable people to interact and bypass any community. Although people may wish to make friends and get involved in social groups, they may alternatively choose to remain independent of any community. Therefore, I thought it appropriate to write about the benefits of being part of the gay community and organisations that exist to support and assist gay people. Of course, as mentioned in the chapter on careers, I am using the word “gay” to simplify my writing. However, in the gay community it is politically correct to use the expression “Lesbian, Bisexual, Gay, Transgender (LBGT)”. Therefore, where I use the word “gay” as in gay community I mean LBGT people. By referring to the gay community I am including all people who identify with it and can feel a sense of belonging by being part of it.

As some readers may have deduced, I am not a person with an enormous social circle. Although I have learnt not to be shy and to interact with others, I used to keep to myself for much of the time as I was growing up, as I had briefly explained in the chapter entitled “looking good on a low budget”. Even now, I prefer the company of a small number of good friends to many casual acquaintances. Indeed, I can feel comfortable by myself and do not feel the need to be around people at all times. It is just that I like my friends and enjoy chatting and going out and about with them, so that we can share thoughts and pleasant experiences. Strange as it could appear to some, I have both gay and straight friends. Now in general, if I make a new friend I let him or her know that I am gay as soon as I can. Then I know if he or she is supportive or not. It also removes any awkwardness later, should my friend discover that I am gay from a source other than me. If I tell him or her, it is also easier for him or her to trust me. In rare instances a man I tell may think I did so because I am attracted to him. This does not matter if I treat him well because it is clear that I do not intend to use him. However, it can mean that a person may wish to be distant rather than be friends with a gay man. In practice, I have not found that this occurs. Indeed, most people I had known for a long time before being told already suspected I was gay. Having friends is like being part of a community. One has much in common, such as interests and memories of being together. Undoubtedly, most readers will have the same experience.

Advantages of being part of a community

Recently, I was talking with someone I know about this book during the process of writing it. We were talking about issues related to the gay community. As often happens when one discusses ideas with others, they can develop and become far more interesting or appealing than they had seemed originally. Many relevant points are contributed by others in conversation. Therefore, I asked this man permission to put his comments into my book and he agreed. Much of our discussion centred around his views on a sense of belonging, identity and purpose.



This man mentioned that people search to find belonging, identity and purpose. These are important for mental health and together enable people to be fully healthy. Being part of something outside themselves gives people a sense of belonging. It also helps to form their identity, to answer the question of who they are. Belonging and identity help to give a person a sense of purpose. Sport, fashion and business were mentioned by the man to be areas which could foster a sense of belonging in people who were involved with them. He said that they were all areas in which a person could achieve without having to be part of a certain social group or class.

In some cultures more than others, people may feel themselves separated from others according to economic factors (how much they earn or own), social factors (such as the work they do or whom they mix with), and amount of education received. However, in sport, fashion or business one did not need to be well-educated, rich or part of an elite group in order to excel. The man thought this was a big reason for the popularity of these pursuits. For example, through sport all people watching a game or match could feel a sense of belonging that transcended any boundaries they could have; whether social, educational or otherwise. In a sense, a sporting event can unite all who participate in it, whether there in person at a sports stadium or just watching the event on television. That sense of belonging is something many people want very much. Of course, this is not restricted to sport, fashion and business. These are just examples and other pursuits can also give rise to a sense of belonging that transcends boundaries. The example of sport can hopefully draw attention to thoughts and feelings consistent with a sense of belonging, identity and purpose.

Being part of the gay community can also provide a sense of belonging, identity and purpose. Gay people have many different circumstances in life; different jobs, hobbies and lifestyles. They are from numerous cultural backgrounds, can be young or old and have unique personalities. However, same-sex preferences and shared experiences of interacting with straight people in a variety of different situations bind members of the community together. When coming to terms with being gay it can be difficult to form a gay identity and to feel part of the gay community, large as it is. The gay community exists in towns, cities, countries and is also worldwide.

However, seeking to mix with members of the gay community makes the process of accepting oneself as a gay person easier. It can be intimidating at first. However, the process of learning about oneself can also be fun and it can be wonderful to get to know and be surrounded by welcoming people who have a lot in common. Definitely, mixing within a large gay community helped me come out and completely accept myself as a gay man at the age of 21 years. It can be life-changing for a gay person to feel like part of and identify with the gay community.

The man with whom I had a conversation gave the example of a marriage, providing validation of the bond between two people in love. It confirms the deeper significance of the love two people share. Usually a marriage is also a significant event in the community or communities to which a couple marrying belong. Therefore, it has social significance and shows that the bond of love is now official. In the chapter covering use of social media services, the term “Facebook official” was used for relationships in this way. Belonging to a community also does this. In the chapter concerning evidence against being gay by choice, I presented arguments that one does not choose to be gay. It is just that the absolute scientific proof of this is lacking. The sooner a gay person can accept his or her same-sex preferences, the better. Being part of the gay community validates the identity of a gay person. It makes it easier to talk to others about being gay and settles inner conflict to a certain extent. Instead of fighting oneself for much of the time, one can go on living! The validation which is part of belonging to the gay community speeds up the process of self-acceptance.

A further benefit of being part of a community is support of a constructive lifestyle, for gay and straight people. Indeed, a person may not need to belong to a community as much as just having a friend or friends. Without that support, certain people can take up destructive habits, such as excessive drinking of alcohol or use of other “recreational” drugs to the point of self-harm. Without peers who can act as role models and/or provide social support, certain people may focus on destructive lifestyle choices, for whatever reason. In my opinion emotional pain, loneliness and frustration can cause people without social support to harm themselves. The presence of friends or a sense of inclusion in a community enables people to feel supported when making constructive choices. Rather than be overwhelming, life can then be enjoyable.

Myths and stereotypes

It is possible that myths and stereotypes may inhibit some people from greater involvement in the gay community. Without having met many gay people, it is easy to make assumptions. It is perhaps good for me to consider some of them here. However, there may be other stereotypes I do not write about. One stereotype is that gay guys are effeminate (“femme”), “sissies”, “pansies”, that mince, flap their wrists about and many other flamboyant expressions are possible to add. Other stereotypes might be that gay guys are weak or lack courage. Another stereotype is that gay ladies (lesbians) are masculine (“butch”) and do not act like ladies, maybe also that they are aggressive.

In the chapter of this book on women’s issues I wrote about gay ladies and relationships between them. It is sufficient here to say that these stereotypes are unfair because they do not reflect the full range of personalities of people who are gay. Just as straight guys can be effeminate or timid, or that straight ladies can be masculine or bossy, so too can gay people be like this. However, one can find many differences in personality amongst gay people. Gay men can be masculine and brave and gay ladies can be feminine and gentle, indeed very much so! Gay guys and ladies can be very “straight-acting”. Should one be anxious about meeting an effeminate gay man or a masculine gay lady, then this should not be a problem. There will always be others who are not. Therefore, one could just politely say goodbye and walk away. Stereotypes should not prevent a person from getting to know people in the gay community. Indeed, by meeting people in the gay community, myths and stereotypes can be broken down and one can discover that gay people are human, like everyone else!

One myth could be that gay men cannot refrain from seducing or having sex with other men, especially if they are handsome. Some straight guys could find this idea threatening. In fact, gay guys are as capable of self-discipline as straight guys. Indeed, it is part of an unspoken code of conduct amongst gay people (ladies included) in the gay community not to do anything to someone that he or she would not want done, even if both individuals are gay and there is mutual attraction. Rape is not something to be expected! The same suggestion can apply to meeting straight and gay people for the first time (such as after dating online). It is best to do so in a neutral location where there are likely to be members of the public, rather than a private house. It is just safer that way, even if trouble is highly unlikely to occur. In general, one cannot expect problems when meeting gay people.

Another myth is that gay people are sub-human or monstrous! In my experience, gay people are like other people in general. They are certainly not sub-human or monstrous. There are people who harm others. Therefore, one must be careful when meeting people for the first time.



However, I do not think one is more likely to meet such people in the gay community than elsewhere. One may find a myth like this wherever one finds racism, mass-hatred or crimes against ethnic minorities occurring. Indeed, I would suggest that an individual exposed to such a myth about any group of human beings should be careful of people spreading it. Such people could be dangerous and may turn on individuals who associate with them with the same hatred and mistrust they have towards others. If indoctrinated or just unsure, then consider that most biological variables have a normal distribution; they form a bell-shaped curve with most values in the middle, from one end of the range to the other. It would be unnatural for a whole population to have extreme negative characteristics! Being an optimist at heart, I like to think that human nature everywhere is basically good.

The last myth to cover is that a community has to involve a large number of people or life in a city. Indeed, a community of local gay people could be said to exist where there are only two people!

Therefore, if gay individuals are living in rural or remote areas, they can still be part of a local gay community if there are two or more people. If separated by distance, a community can be united by means of rapid communication, such as two-way radio, telephone or by computer (e-mail and the internet). Rural communities could seem to be threatened by gay people, especially if they have never met a gay person (officially). They might feel that they have no outside support, should anything go wrong. However, by understanding that gay people are not choosing to be gay but rather must come to terms with it or suffer, they may be sympathetic. Furthermore, by understanding that gay people can lead happy lives and also have love in their lives just like straight people, a sense of threat may be eased. Then a gay person might not feel the need to leave the rural community out of loneliness, despair or fear of discrimination. Education and communication can help to unite people and friends and loved ones can be retained within existing communities.

Anti-gay laws in certain countries around the world

While writing that there is less discrimination against gay people now than in the past, this is in general terms. In many countries, two men or two women can have sex with each other legally. In addition, gay people can meet without fear in these countries. However, there are other countries around the world where it is still a crime for gay adults to have sex, or where gay people can only meet in fear that they may be harmed. Penalties for breaking laws against gay people can include death sentences or being put in prison for many years. When visiting such countries from those with more freedom for gay people, please be careful. One can be harmed for breaking the law there. Due to the fact that the author may be a guest in such countries in the future, he is reluctant to name them and the penalties, so as not to be viewed as singling out some countries with harsh punishments but not others. This information is available elsewhere and should be checked when travelling to any of the numerous countries around the world. It is always respectful to keep local customs, in any case. Furthermore, I do not wish to judge such countries or their leadership. They may consider that they have good reasons for their laws and that anti-gay laws are not just due to hatred against gay people.

No doubt there are educated and considerate people in these countries, as there are in others within this global village. Surely, efforts can be made to modify or remove unfair laws with time because laws are there to help keep order for the welfare of all people.

Should anyone in the leadership of such a country be reading this book, then please consider the points I am making. Being gay is not likely to be a matter of choice. If anything, scientific evidence in support of this is growing. If one believes in God, then God is loving, just and even merciful; just as a leader can be.⁸² They can afford to be merciful who have much. Gay people need not be considered a threat but rather an asset to a country because it is possible to think of human nature as good and of people serving one another. Finally, moral guidance is a tricky area which needs great sensitivity.

Times change, as do the needs of people. To serve people well, guidance should be set in the present and the welfare of all people should be considered. Should one manage to achieve such a nearly impossible task, then others would just marvel at the noble attributes of the leadership; and the corresponding nation would be considered great throughout recorded history.

Organisations which support gay people

Around the world there are many organisations which assist gay people. They function at different levels, namely local, national and international. Local organisations meet the needs of the gay community and people who live in particular regions. National organisations look after the welfare gay people within a country.

International organisations are like national organisations but have operations in different countries. The governments of different nations either run or fund many such organisations. Many different help and support organisations are run by and/or staffed by volunteers who are generous with their time and unpaid; helping out of the love of their own hearts. People who help are concerned about gay issues, often being gay, or having gay friends and/or loved ones who are gay. Behind these organisations are caring people who want to ease the suffering of gay people.

As in the last section, concerning the countries with unfair laws against gay people, I do not wish to single out organisations which support gay people. There are too many to name them all here. However, I can suggest that a reader who needs help because he, she or a friend is gay might contact organisations relevant to his or her situation. It is easy to find such organisations via the internet or by asking people at gay venues, where many gay people meet. These organisations assist in many ways, such as by providing information and education, counselling, access to workshops and support groups. There are also human rights organisations, which strive to help gay people who have been imprisoned or punished due to unjust laws in various countries. There is no need to suffer alone. Many people participate in organisations which are there just to help and support gay people.

Keeping the gay community friendly and welcoming

While writing this book I am mindful of issues raised by young people with whom I have discussed topics included in this book. One issue is the impression on guests of the gay community, who may be people from all walks of life but not gay themselves. For example, they may go to a gay venue (such as a gay pub or nightclub) with a gay person to accompany him or her. In my experience, gay venues are welcoming to all people, as long as they have peaceful intentions and just wish to enjoy themselves. At pubs and night-clubs drinks with alcohol are normally available to buy or consume, so it can be necessary to show proof with photo ID that a person is an adult of the minimum age (such as 18 or 21 years), depending on laws of a country.



Security measures are normally in place to make sure that the pub or nightclubs can stay peaceful. For example, people who have had too much alcohol to drink can become violent and may be asked to leave (not that drinking to excess always causes violence). This is true of all pubs and night-clubs, not just gay venues. On the whole, visitors who are not gay would have pleasant experiences of gay venues, I am sure.

The impression of visitors to the gay community can spread to others, I think. One young gay Asian man I got to know thought that gay people need to show society that they are nice, caring and that sexuality doesn't affect personality. Therefore, once straight people meet nice gay people within the gay community they would not wish to discriminate. The same can be said of gay people who make contact with the gay community and are new to it. The same young gay Asian man whom I just mentioned, said that he had experienced discrimination within the gay community because he is Asian and also mentioned discrimination on other grounds. Another young man who is bisexual and gave me permission to provide his comments let me know of his problems with online dating of gay people. He considered himself "different" for some reason and said that one had even less choice to meet gay guys if one was different. The young man had bad experiences and then found it hard to trust gay guys online. He had a problem when refusing offers for sex. He said if honest about things, people get aggressive, so he just "obscures things" and eventually escapes from contacting that person. Even a reply without committing himself by saying "I'll contact you later" could draw a hostile response, according to him. He found that young guys could be forceful or forward. Although he had been contacted by many older men as well, I am not sure whether or not they were rude too. This young man said that it was not something he had to deal with before (presumably in life, generally). If such experiences are quite common, it can leave a bad impression with many newcomers.

My own memories of the gay community have generally been happy ones. Therefore, I hope that the gay community can continue to be friendly and welcome newcomers (young and old) and visitors who are not themselves gay. Reports, such as from the two young men I just mentioned concern me because the usually pleasant nature of the gay community could change. Therefore, I urge all people within the gay community to keep it friendly for the sake of newcomers and visitors. Gay people will want to be part of the gay community when they see just how nice gay people can be, if it remains friendly and respectful. It also gives the wider community a good impression of gay people. Should young gay people feel welcome and have a sense of belonging within the gay community, then there should be no need for this book (as someone I know had said)! My own role as a gay man through this book has been to be a bridge for others to cross. From my experience, I have tried to give people in need of it a new perspective. There is a gulf which I observed that many young gay people could not cross because they had no cultural way of dealing with it. Through this book, I have tried to bridge this gulf and am sure that many other people in the gay community can do the same.

Conclusion

From the same source of ancient Chinese philosophy of which I am fond, that I had quoted at the very start of this book, I can quote Lao Tzu:¹

A journey of a thousand miles begins beneath the feet.

Hopefully the journey of the reader through this book has not been too tiring. Although my writing style may sometimes be peculiar, I hope that it could be understood reasonably. At the end of this book, I am hoping that many readers will indeed have become aware of ways of having better relationships with friends and people at work and vast fields of opportunities for genuine romance and love.

This book has been written by me with an attitude mindful of many areas of concern to young people, especially young gay people. Out of their continued troubles, I saw an opportunity to ease some suffering. Along the way, I realised how other young people who were not necessarily gay had major areas of concern and tried to address these where appropriate. Therefore, I am hoping that this book potentially had something to offer all young people, irrespective of their sexual preferences. The topics chosen in this book arose from discussions with young people about areas they thought were important, including young gay people.

There is no substitute for experience, one's own being the best. Lessons learned along my way have been very memorable indeed! Hopefully, this book has provided some stepping stones along which to skip merrily towards a happy and fulfilling life. Not necessarily just mistakes of mine to avoid but opportunities to seize and challenges to overcome. In that way, I can have brought some light to any darkness.

These words of experience can hopefully help to make a career fare better than mine and achieve a lifestyle which is at least as satisfying as mine. Life has no limit to amazing possibilities. Along the way one can meet so many wonderful people and there is so much joy and happiness one can feel and share with others. Of course, there are problems and sorrows. I do not think anyone will be able to avoid all of them. However, to me life is like a journey for a traveller who steers a sailing boat, although I have tried sailing in boats and am very clumsy. The gentle breeze fills the sails and the boat moves effortlessly along its course. Provided the traveller steers carefully, the boat stays clear of the rocks and is not stranded in a shallow area. The destination does not matter, although it can give pleasure to think about it. However, the journey provides a constant source of fascination and enjoyment. There is always a sense of peace and excitement. My wish is that the reader can have such an experience of life, no matter what the journey holds, for this is a mystery that I think every traveller can enter into wholeheartedly if he or she so chooses.



Cautionary Note

Surprisingly bad events have occurred in some countries only months before the release date of this book in early April 2014. To the reader: You are an individual to whom homophobia may potentially bring harm; please consider your safety and survival if you are in a country and situation where this applies. Parents and guardians, please consider these aspects for anybody under your care and not yet an adult. This message has been placed at the beginning and end of this book.



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WORDS OF EXPERIENCE