

# Mentorship of Men Who Struggle with Same-Sex Attraction

by

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## Abstract

*It is the author's experience that mentoring relationships have been helpful for men who strive to decrease Same-Sex Attraction (SSA). This article discusses the father injury commonly present in men who struggle with SSA, and the ways in which the mentoring process reenacts the father-son family dynamic.*

*The creation of such relationships is discussed, as well as the role of the mentor and ideal characteristics of such men. Activities are suggested that can be shared in the mentoring relationship, and pitfalls are warned against that may arise in the relationship.*



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Many Protestant churches have lay counseling programs called Stephen's Ministries. In these programs, lay counselors are well-trained to be empathetic listeners and to understand their role as being supportive rather than therapeutic. This appears to be ideal training for the mentor role when working with people who struggle with SSA. We see some potential in coordinating local Exodus Ministries (Christian ex-gay ministries) with churches that offer Stephen's Ministries to create mentoring relationships.

## Introduction

For most men who struggle with Same-Sex Attraction (SSA), altering their sexual responses will require tremendous effort. To improve success, these men need as much support as can be afforded them. Therapists have long acknowledged the value of multi-modal approaches to psychological problems (Lazarus, 1988). Experience in our clinic informs us that this also applies to men who seek to alter their sexual orientation. They appear to benefit from individual psychotherapy, couples therapy, bibliotherapy, support groups, 12-step programs, psychotherapy groups, and mentoring relationships.

This paper is designed to describe some important aspects of the mentoring relationship. It is my hope that this paper will be useful for people in the position of creating mentoring programs or mentoring relationships for men with SSA. In addition, my hope is that other people who have experiences in mentoring relationships will share their experiences with the author so that further information can be accumulated for educational purposes.

We have very little information about mentorship programs. Indeed, it appears that they are very rare. The best possibility for developing such a program may be in church settings, and in our local area, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (LDS) has had some success with creating successful relationships. In this situation, the leaders of the church body select men they believe are qualified and assign them the task of mentoring a young man as a part of their obligation to the church. This arrangement has some inherent advantages. Since the mentors are selected rather than volunteer, the men can be evaluated for both character qualities and masculine identification before the assignment is made.

Another option would be for the man who struggles with SSA to create his own mentoring relationship. One therapist informed me about a client who accomplished this by joining an organization that offered assistance to senior adults. Over time, he developed relationships with a number of the men for whom he did volunteer work. He eventually concentrated his time and efforts onto one of the men, and both men found the father-son dynamic very gratifying.

But an important and often missing element in creating these relationships and ministries is information about the role of the mentor.

Mentoring is a process in which an emotionally and spiritually mature man befriends and walks beside a younger man who struggles with SSA. A mentor is not a therapist and so does not need to have special knowledge of SSA. He should not be in a position of ecclesiastical authority over the mentee. He needs only to act as an adult father figure to an adult son. The purpose of mentoring is to help in healing the father wound of the mentee's childhood.

## The Father Injury

Men who struggle with SSA have not achieved a complete internalized sense of masculinity; they feel they lack some essential part of masculinity that other men have. This leaves them feeling unacceptable and ultimately inadequate and unsafe in the society of men. Although feeling inadequate is a common feeling to all men, those who struggle with SSA apparently feel it more intensely and have established a defense of emotional and /or physical withdrawal from the world of men and masculinity (Moberly, 1983, Nicolosi, 1991).

These men inevitably suffer from some sort of injury in

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their relationship with their father. Either the father did not achieve his own sense of competence and strength in the world, or he rejected the son (covertly or overtly) and failed to share his masculinity with him. In either case the boy did not form an intimate relationship with a strong and moral father figure. Since young children never perceive their parents as flawed, the young boy naturally assumes that the reason the father does not seek him out and love him is that he, the child, is inadequate in some way. This leaves him longing for affection and attention from his father (or father figure), yet hurt and fearful of further rejection. For the boy who will later develop SSA, there is a fear of men and sense of alienation from them (Moberly, 1983, Nicolosi, 1991).

At a very early age, before choice is a factor, the child begins to protect himself from rejection by defensively detaching from his father, who later comes to represent all men (Moberly, 1983, Nicolosi, 1991). He tells himself that he doesn't need his father's love or approval; that he doesn't care about his father. At this point the child begins to develop an identity in which he simultaneously rejects his own masculinity and longs for the love, affection and approval of a strong and confident man. The boy dis-identifies with his father; he in essence says to himself, "My father is bad, I don't want to be like him." This often leaves the boy with no one to identify with outside of his mother.

Since parental systems function in unison, where the father vacates, the mother overcompensates. Often, the marriage is compromised and the mother devalues the father. If this happens, a bond is formed between mother and son based on their shared rejection of the father. Since the boy has no one else to depend on, he must modify himself in any way necessary to maintain his relationship with his mother. This inevitably includes joining the mother in devaluing (dis-identifying with) the father (Bieber, et al., 1988, Socarides, 1978).

### **The Fantasy Idealization**

When a young man is left fearful of adult men and not understanding how to interact with them, yet desiring a powerful emotional connection, commonly a fantasy idealization of men emerges. For the young man who will develop SSA, this idealization becomes sexualized. This sexualization begins as a way to create a feeling of safety and stop the fear/panic response that is triggered by things that remind him of his own masculine inadequacy. The sexual fantasy provides the young man with two things that he needs: it allows him to remain safely detached from identifying with men, while providing him with a powerful emotional connection with men.

His dis-identification with men protects him from his fear of masculine incompetence; in addition, it protects his bond with his mother. But the sexual fantasy or behavior allows the struggler to have connection with a man with-

out the overwhelmingly frightening obligation to become a man. He forfeits becoming fully male, which he fears he cannot achieve, in exchange for having the love and approval of a man. He becomes sexually attracted to the characteristics of other men that he feels he cannot achieve in himself.

### **Healthy Development**

In a healthy family setting, a boy naturally internalizes masculinity when he is pursued and loved by his father, whom he perceives as strong and good. It is the father's job to go into the maternal nest and literally take his son away from the security of his mother. Boys are always frightened and cling to their mothers, but this fear does not make them mama's boys—it is natural. When the father aggressively claims his son as his own, the boy feels scared on the one hand and excited on the other. He learns to use scary and noisy tools, he learns to ride his bike without training wheels, he learns to catch a baseball, and he learns to dive into deep water. Each triumph with father forms a powerful bond between the father and son. The father's natural pride and interest in his son mirrors the boy's own growing sense of masculine competence. This sense of competence can then be taken into the world of his peers and confirmed further. When the process works, the boy naturally feels like a member of the world of his peers (the society of men).

For the man who struggles with SSA, something went wrong in this process. He does not develop a complete internalized sense of masculinity; he does not feel like a member of the society of men. He feels different and alienated from men. Homosexual enactment can be viewed as the young man's unconscious abandonment of the pursuit to become a man; instead, he accepts the compromise of having another man love and value him sexually.

The mentor serves to work toward healing this wound. But mentors must understand that this wound will never be healed completely. Even a perfect mentoring relationship will not make up for a lost childhood when an affirming father would have made the real difference.

### **The Characteristics of a Good Mentor**

To be effective, a mentor must have several characteristics. No one can be the perfect embodiment of these characteristics; nonetheless, the mentor must be very strong in this set of characteristics. A good mentor must demonstrate self-confidence and good moral character. That is, he must have achieved a sense of masculine competence of his own.

A good mentor must have strong gender identity. That is, he must feel good about himself as a man. This does not mean being "super macho." Hyper-masculinity can actually be a sign of weak gender identification. Evidence of sound gender security includes the lack of defensiveness



or the need to prove anything to anyone, and active participation in his masculine roles—e.g., as father, husband, provider, and ecclesiastical leader, with male friendships and participation in some typical male activities. In addition, males with good gender identification relate respectfully and well to women. Such a man respects and likes women, and it shows. In essence, he should enjoy every aspect of being a man.

A good mentor will have good ego strength. What this means is that he does not get his feelings hurt easily and has no problem setting limits with his mentee. Mentoring can be very trying, and requires tenacity for the long haul. Same-sex attraction did not form overnight and even with highly motivated clients, it will not go away overnight. Furthermore, the mentor's self-esteem cannot depend on the success of his mentee. He must remain positive, loving, and encouraging no matter how badly his mentee fails.

Men who struggle with SSA can be at the same time emotionally needy and defensively detached. This means they long for emotional contact with men, but fear being hurt. At the first sign of abandonment they can become defensive and even reactive which can easily be interpreted as condescendence. The mentor can never take the defensiveness personally and must be able to set limits on the emotional neediness.

A good mentor must be emotionally available. He must be comfortable with his own feelings and able to share these with the mentee. He must also be comfortable with his own weaknesses, failures, embarrassments, and fears, and be able to share these with the mentee during times when this type of disclosure would be helpful. He must be able to hear the mentee talk about his own fears, anger, feelings of inadequacy, and pain without becoming anxious or needing to minimize or "fix" them.

### **Emotional Support, Not Problem Solving**

It is not the job of the mentor to know what the mentee should do, or to fix his problems: this is very important. The mentor's primary job is to be present over the long haul and to remain emotionally supportive. The mentor is neither the mentee's moral authority nor his therapist and does not need to take responsibility for him or direct him in these ways. Men who struggle with SSA badly need both spiritual direction and therapeutic help, but this is not the mentor's role.

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

### **Physical Affection**

A good mentor must be physically affectionate. Many people believe that being physically affectionate with men who struggle with SSA will exacerbate their symptoms, but nothing could be further from the truth. Men who struggle with SSA are afraid of male affection. It is precisely this fear that makes male affection so intensely sexually interesting. As long as the mentor has a strong gender identity, there is no chance of the encounter becoming sexual. This is exactly the kind of safe situation in which the mentee needs to experiment with allowing himself to genuinely love and need nonsexual male affection. The deepest longing of the man who struggles with SSA is not for sex; it is for love and affirmation.

Finally, the mentor is the one who must pursue the relationship. The mentee at the core does not trust that the mentor could ever be genuinely interested in him and, at the same time, not need something from him. This is a continuation of the father-child injury. For this reason, the mentee will not (and should not) be the initiator in the relationship. Developmentally it is the father's role to initiate and maintain the father-son relationship.

In addition, when there is any confusion or conflict, the mentee is very likely to assume that he did something wrong and to withdraw or devalue the relationship. The mentor must remember that the withdrawal from, or devaluing of, the relationship is a defense (usually unconscious) against the intense need and longing for the love and affirmation of an idealized male. The mentor must not take anything personally and continue to gently but actively pursue the other man.

### **Suggested Activities**

Men who struggle with SSA long for a non-anxious connection with men. Therefore the mentor needs to take the initiative in identifying activities that will be fun for both, and yet not too anxiety-provoking. He should explore their shared interests such as art, music, theater, cars or sports, with each introducing the other to things they individually enjoy. Over time, the relationship will develop in a way that will allow the mentee to take more risks without fearing embarrassment or humiliation.

Some men who struggle with SSA have so strongly defensively-detached from masculinity that almost any male-typical activity will trigger a fear/inadequacy response. In the beginning, even watching a basketball game together may be stress-provoking. Defensive detachment is rarely, however, expressed as fear: the mentee will probably never say, "I'm afraid of appearing stupid if I watch a game with you." He is much more likely to express disinterest, saying, for example "I have never seen the point of football. It is nothing but egotistical male aggression!"



The mentor must see through this defense and slowly encourage his mentee to be a part of the world of men. This can only happen over time and when trust is established. Clearly, it is not necessary for all men who struggle with SSA to become NFL fans; they must, however, develop to the point that they can attend a Super Bowl party or a church softball game without feeling overwhelmed with anxiety and inadequacy.

### **Fear Can Trigger Sexual Acting-Out**

Learning to play team sports and be competitive at them is often a problem for men who struggle with SSA. Although they should be encouraged to do so, this should be approached with extreme caution. Mere encouragement in this area can trigger significant fear, which leads to compulsions to act out sexually.

It is typical for these men to gravitate toward individual sports such as track, swimming, diving, and ice-skating to avoid being a member of a team. They feel inadequate to perform in a situation where other men rely on them in competition. Even minor failures in a team sport can be experienced as devastating inadequacy and overwhelming humiliation. It may be wise to consult with the mentee's therapist before approaching this issue.

It is important to include the mentee in family events when possible, since any men who struggle with SSA come from dysfunctional families and so have a distorted view of family life.

The mentor may want to encourage church-based activities. This too must be handled with caution, because in addition to feeling inadequate socially, some men who struggle with SSA feel an overwhelming sense of moral guilt about their sexual orientation. They may not feel like they "fit in" at church either morally or socially. In some cases church attendance can increase anxiety, which in turn can lead to increased sexual compulsion.

### **Humility in Leadership**

A mentor should seek feedback, since mentees often know what they need. Being open to the other man's suggestions can be trust-building. If at any point a mentor hurts or disappoints his mentee, a sincere apology without excuses can be a powerfully healing event. It may be the mentee's first experience of humility from an authority figure.

A mentor should use the mentee's talents. Men who struggle with SSA are often excellent decorators, florists, and gardeners, to mention only a few areas (this is not

merely a stereotype). The talents should be used, praised and celebrated.

It is important however that the mentor never evaluate the mentee's talents in terms of the masculinity of the activity. All men are completely masculine. Their preferences, talents, and feelings are completely masculine. Everything about them is completely masculine. What is lacking in men who struggle with SSA, however, is an internalized sense (feeling) of masculine adequacy. The last thing they need, is to have a man they respect imply—even indirectly—that they are in some way less than completely male. This can be hurtful and humiliating and worse, it replicates the original father-son injury.

### **Summary**

Mentor relationships can be very helpful to men who struggle with SSA. It is important that the mentor understand and maintain a father-like role in the relationship. He also should be strong in ego-strength, character development, and gender identity, and should have some understanding of the father-injury common with these men and the way they use defensive detachment to protect themselves.

Well-informed mentors should understand that they need to be the initiators in the relationship; that their mentees can experience a fear/panic response to childhood masculinity wounds; and that they may respond to these wounds defensively. This type of understanding will aid the mentor in maintaining a positive and encouraging role through the turbulent episodes of this challenging relationship.

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