Potential Problems Facing Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and/or Transgender Youth

Isolation
As lesbian, gay, bisexual, and/or transgender youth begin to experience same-sex attractions or discomfort about their gender identity, they often feel very different from their peers and very alone. They may go to great lengths to deny their feelings to themselves and to hide them from others. Many times they do not personally know any openly lesbian, gay, bisexual, and/or transgender people and they don’t know anyone with whom they feel safe talking about their feelings. Isolation can contribute to feelings of shame, low self-esteem, anxiety, and depression. To cope or escape, individuals (particularly teens) may turn to negative coping behaviors. They may have little or no knowledge of LGBT history or culture, and therefore no feeling of connection to others who share their identity.

Invisibility
Lesbian, gay, bisexual, and/or transgender contributions to our history and culture are not acknowledged in our educational system, contributing to a sense of invisibility. There is widespread distortion of images of what lesbian, gay, bisexual, and/or transgender people are like. Stereotypes and myths are put forward by news media, religious organizations, tv and films, etc., resulting in an inaccurate popular portrayal of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and/or transgender community. In addition to giving all people an inaccurate picture of reality, the negative stereotypes and myths are often internalized by people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, and/or transgender.

Low Self-Esteem
Lesbian, gay, bisexual, and/or transgender youth tend to internalize some of the negative myths and stereotypes about lesbian, gay, bisexual, and/or transgender people that are prevalent in our society. Their shame about their feelings can lead to a very negative self-image.

Depression and Anxiety
Lesbian, gay, bisexual, and/or transgender youth may experience significant emotional distress due to their sense of isolation and low self-esteem, along with the lack of resources available to help them cope with the issues they are facing.

Suicide
Unfortunately, some lesbian, gay, bisexual, and/or transgender youth view suicide as their only option. Research shows that LGBT youth are more likely to attempt suicide than heterosexual peers and that a high percentage of completed youth suicides are LGBT youth.

Substance Abuse and Self-Mutilation
Lesbian, gay, bisexual, and/or transgender youth are especially vulnerable to using self-destructive behaviors, such as turning to alcohol or drugs or engaging in self-directed violence, as a way of trying to cope or escape.

Intimidation
Jokes and ridicule about homosexuality and gender variance are still acceptable in our society. Other negative consequences for being open about one’s sexual orientation or gender identity might include job loss, evictions, custody battles, or loss of friends or associates.
Violence
Youth who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, and/or transgender, or those who are perceived as lesbian, gay, bisexual, and/or transgender, are often the targets of verbal harassment, physical assaults, or sexual assaults. Most of the violence reported comes from family members or peers, but it can also come from others.

Family Problems
In addition to domestic violence, lesbian, gay, bisexual, and/or transgender youth often face rejection or loss of support from their families. A significant number are kicked out of their homes or run away. Nationwide, approximately 25 percent of all homeless youth are lesbian, gay, or bisexual.

Sexually Transmitted Diseases and HIV/AIDS
Lesbian, gay, bisexual, and/or transgender youth are especially at risk for a number of reasons, including: 1) the lack of specific sex education about homosexual activity; 2) denial and secrecy about one’s sexual orientation or gender identity; 3) self-destructive behaviors related to internalized homophobia; and 4) resorting to sex-trade work as a means of survival on the streets (survival sex).

Denial of Basic Civil Rights
Persons who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, and/or transgender are still discriminated against due to their sexual orientation or gender identity. They may be denied housing, lose custody of their children, lose their jobs, or suffer in other areas of their lives.

Adapted from Kathy Obear, The Human Advantage, 1989.