

Understanding Unwanted Same-Sex Attraction: A Context Specific Approach

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If you struggle with unwanted feelings of same-sex attraction, I hope that what you are about to read will be of great interest to you. I wish that you and I were sitting down together to discuss these ideas. I wish that we could look each other in the eye and I could hear your story and respond to your questions. Since that is not possible right now I want to ask you to approach what you are about to read differently than many things you read.

I would suggest that you read this material slowly. The point of reading this material is not to get through it, but rather to consider it carefully. Also, as you read this material, ask yourself four questions: First, Is this logical? In other words, does it make sense? Second, does this fit my experience? Are the things that are being described here an accurate representation of things that I have experienced in my own life? Third, is this compatible with the spiritual and religious truths that have guided my life thus far? And finally, does this feel right? Does it ring true?

There are many different opinions on this topic. Each claims validity from different sources: expertise, credentials, science, personal experience and sometimes their own anger or pain. In this whirlwind of opinions, the validity I most seek is *your* experience as *you* read this. For better or worse, you must trust your logic, your experience, your beliefs and your heart. I believe that will be enough.

During the last twenty years I have had the opportunity to counsel with many individuals who have struggled with feelings of unwanted same-sex attraction. The great majority of these individuals have had a strong testimony of the gospel and a strong desire to live by its teachings. But many of them have become confused, discouraged and deeply frustrated as they have struggled to reconcile their deeply held religious beliefs and values with their sometimes overwhelming feelings of same-sex attraction. They have searched for reasons why such feelings were occurring in their lives and looked for solutions. Many have felt confused and disappointed when the gospel, which had always been the most important thing in their lives, did not seem to be sufficient to help them overcome this, their greatest challenge.

As I have sought to help these individuals my understanding of this issue has been transformed and my faith in the gospel of Jesus Christ has been greatly strengthened. I would like to share with you some of the things I have come to understand about this issue. I want to explain why I believe that the gospel, properly understood and applied, is the key to dealing with this issue and that it has the power to make "weak things become strong" (Ether 12:27) in the lives of these men.

Some years ago as a graduate student at Brigham Young University studying marriage and family therapy, I was troubled by an article written by a prominent Latter-day Saint psychiatrist which made, what seemed to be a convincing argument: that individuals struggling with unwanted feelings of same-sex attraction had no real possibility of changing or significantly diminishing those feelings. It struck me that if this were really true then there were many individuals, who through no fault of their own, lacked the ability to live one of the most critical parts of the gospel as I understood it. This observation presented a challenge to my own faith. I wondered, "How this could be? Would the Lord not prepare a way for them to accomplish the things which he had commanded them? (1 Nephi 3:7) Would he not offer help to those who sought him as diligently as many of these individuals had?" I worried that if the promises of the gospel were not true for these individuals then perhaps they were not true for me either.

At this time I was working as an intern in the campus clinic. My fellow graduate students and I had received no instruction on helping individuals who struggled with same-sex attraction. This very difficult issue had not been mentioned in any classroom discussion. While I was sitting in the intern's office one day, the intern who assigned cases walked in to the room. He held up an intake folder and said, "Anybody here want to talk to a guy who thinks he's gay?" Everyone seemed to look at the floor in an uncomfortable silence. Homosexuality seemed to be too far out of our range of experience for us to comfortably deal with it. The silence continued for a few moments until finally, I volunteered to talk to him because I had been troubled by some of the doctrinal and philosophical issues surrounding this difficult question.

On the day of the appointment, I sat down with this young man and listened to his story. It was a story similar to many I have heard since then. He described how early in his teenage years he began to recognize that, unlike the other young men around him, his feelings of physical attraction were not directed toward girls. He described the fear and confusion he felt. He talked about his inability to control or suppress the strong physical desires he felt toward men. Finally, with tears of frustration, he told me he was trying to decide whether to enter into therapy and try to overcome his same-sex attractions or to leave the state to pursue a homosexual lifestyle and never again contact his family or anyone he knew. He asked me, "Can you promise that if I enter into therapy and try to overcome this problem, I will never have any of these feelings again for the rest of my life?" I looked him in the eye and with more honesty than confidence I said, "I don't know." He didn't seem impressed. Sensing his deep anguish, however, I blurted out, "But I'll find out."

Following that session I went to the University library and started searching for information as quickly I could. I also talked to other people to

find out anything I could about treating this problem. I found a doctoral dissertation that summarized many years of research on this topic that seemed to indicate that many men with same-sex attractions can be successful at significantly altering their sexual desires. I photocopied some pages out of this dissertation, took them to our second session, and showed them to him. I'm guessing it doesn't inspire a lot of faith when your therapist shows up in your session equipped only with information he found in the library the day before. As he looked over those photocopied pages I thought, "Well I won't be seeing him again; I've really blown this."

But to my surprise he made another appointment. During that week I worried that he wouldn't show up to his next appointment, but he did. He sat down across from me and said, "I have made up my mind that no matter how long it takes and no matter what I have to do, I am going to live the gospel of Jesus Christ, and I am going to overcome this problem." I was stunned. I knew that nothing I had said to him could have generated this kind of commitment.

In my life I have had a number of experiences in which I was confident that the Spirit was speaking to me. This was one of them. As I sat and looked at this individual the impression came to me that, "This young man's parents have been praying for him. That is why he has made this decision. You are to be part of the answer to their prayers. So you be careful." This impression came so strongly that it affected me deeply. After this experience we began working together and through his sincere efforts he made significant progress.

I soon began to work with a number of other men struggling with same-sex attraction, and I became increasingly interested in helping those dealing with this issue. Before long when individuals dealing with this issue came into the clinic, they were routinely referred to me.

As I counseled more individuals dealing with this issue, I decided that I would do my doctoral dissertation on the topic. I was particularly interested in whether or not men who struggle with same-sex attraction could truly change. It seemed that if it was really possible for these men to change, I should be able to find some who actually been successful in completing that change. I reasoned that if I couldn't find anyone who was successful at changing, it would be hard to make the argument that change is possible. Clearly, people would not be impressed if I sat down with them and said, "As far as I know no one's ever done this successfully, but I'm confident that you'll be the first one."

In completing this research I was able to interview a number of men who reported having successfully dealt with same-sex attraction. They reported that their feelings of physical and emotional attraction toward men had changed significantly enough that they were able to enter into and

sustain successful heterosexual marriages. Each of them was interviewed in detail about what they meant when they said they had changed. I recorded and compiled their responses; then I took a careful look at what those responses had in common. I asked myself, "What are the common elements in each description of change?" One of the first things I noticed was that when you ask someone, "How have you changed?" the first thing they tell you is how things used to be. So, without intending to, I compiled a very rich description of how the challenge of same-sex attraction developed in their lives. Much of what follows comes directly from that doctoral dissertation. I believe their responses can help us better understand what many men experience.

Common Traits Among Men Who Experience Same-Sex Attraction

Researchers commonly look for shared traits as they try to understand why some men struggle with same-sex attraction. They look specifically for shared traits that are different from traits of men who do not have same-sex attractions. The popular media sometimes highlights studies that purport to show differences in brain structure, hormone levels, kinship ties, and so forth. Such reports may contribute to the popular idea that science has conclusively shown same-sex attraction to be entirely the result of biological or genetic cause. This is simply not true. While some correlations have been found, these correlations are too weak to be conclusive. It is also often the case that such research simply has not been replicated enough to substantiate a direct biological cause.

While I have been unimpressed by the evidence for a direct biological cause, I am however, interested in correlations. It has been my experience that men who struggle with feelings of same sex attraction consistently share three significant personality traits. These traits are almost universal among these men; in fact, when one of these traits is not present, there has generally been some sort of strong introductory experience, such as sexual abuse, that may have contributed to their feelings of same-sex attraction.

The first characteristic shared by men who struggle with same-sex attraction is that they tend to be unusually emotionally sensitive. They say things like, "I have always been more tenderhearted than other people," "I have always felt things more deeply than other people," "I have trouble controlling my emotions," "I get my feelings hurt easily," or "I cry more easily than other people."

The second personality trait shared by these men is that they are unusually introspective. They are often very intelligent, they do a lot of thinking, and much of their thinking is self analytical. They often make

statements such as, "People tell me I think too much," "I analyze things to death," "I think myself into circles," "I think myself into knots," or "I'm always trying to understand myself."

The third and perhaps the most ironic trait that these men have in common is that they have an unusually strong sense of right and wrong, coupled with an unusually strong desire to be right. I use the term "right" very broadly: to be right, to be worthy, to be righteous, to be normal, to be popular, to be liked, to be attractive, to be okay, to be helpful, to be talented, to be good looking. They just want to get things right—to be good. When parents find out they have a son dealing with this issue, they will sometimes say, "This was my best child. He was the most devout, the most obedient, the most helpful, and the most tenderhearted." It is not unusual for these men to have had outstanding histories of activity in the Church and to have held positions of responsibility and leadership in their Aaronic Priesthood quorums, in their seminary classes or on their missions.

These three characteristics—emotional sensitivity, introspection, and the desire to be right are each good attributes. The world needs more men who are sensitive, thoughtful, and who want to do good. Yet I believe that these three characteristics are the single most significant reason why these men "get stuck" in same-sex attraction. It is a great irony that these three positive characteristics play a prominent role in such an agonizing difficulty. It is as though Satan says, "Here is a group of men who could do great good in this world. What can I do to stop them?"

How could this be? How could three positive characteristics lead to such a difficult problem? In order to understand the answer to this question we must first understand how the very language we use to describe same-sex attraction in our culture shapes our understanding of this problem.

The Ways Culture and Language Affect

Our Views of Same-Sex Attraction

Some of the ways we use language in our culture create false ideas about same-sex attraction. To illustrate: If I hold an object out in front of me and drop it, it will fall. Why does it fall? You would probably say it falls because of gravity. So would I. But the fact of the matter is that we do not really know why things fall; all we know is that everything that is not supported falls. Gravity is one of the four fundamental physical forces of the universe. All observable events in the universe can be explained in terms of these four forces: gravity, electromagnetism, the strong nuclear force and the weak nuclear force. These physical forces explain everything we see, but so far nothing has fully explained them. It is important to note that each of these forces is really a description or a label that tells us *how* things behave *not* a cause or an explanation of *why* they behave. The word "gravity" then is

really a description of what things do; they fall. So we put a label on what things do. We call the fact that things fall "gravity". We then do a very interesting thing; we talk as though we have explained it when all we have really done is labeled it:

"Why do things fall?"

"Well, they fall because of gravity."

"But how do you know there is gravity??"

"Well.....because things fall."

"But what makes them fall??!"

"Well.....gravity!"

See how language can simply go in a circle? Using the word gravity really adds no new information to the fact that things fall. It simply makes it more convenient to talk about. The problem then is that we pay a price for the convenience of labeling things. We sometimes began to believe that we have explained something when all that we have really done is labeled it.

We use language to label many other things in our culture and then describe them as having occurred as a result of the label. This a common practice in the social sciences. The concept of self-esteem is a good example. Self-esteem began as a description of people's behavior. People who said or thought *good* things about themselves were described as having high self-esteem and people who said or thought *bad* things about themselves were described as having low self-esteem. But what began as a description of what people were *doing* came to be talked about as though it was the reason they were doing it.

"Why does that person say such bad things about himself?"

"Well, he must have low self-esteem."

"How do you know he has low self-esteem?"

"Well, because he says such bad things about himself."

"Why does he do that?"

"Because he has low self-esteem."

The language we use creates the idea that we have something inside us called "self-esteem" that can make us do things. Our words can create the impression that we do not have much choice in the matter. When asked why we are so down on ourselves, we say that it is due to our low self-esteem. And so we have created a *cause* called "self-esteem," when in reality it is simply a label for something that people do. Such ways of talking and thinking quickly become accepted as common knowledge. Most of us have grown up simply accepting the idea that we have something

inside us called our "self esteem" and that this thing has the power to make us think and act in certain ways.

The way we use language has real consequences. The way we talk about things soon becomes the way we think about them, understand them and respond to them. I believe that this is particularly true in the lives of individuals who struggle with unwanted feelings of same-sex attraction. We may ask:

"Why is that man sexually attracted to other men?"

"It is because he is homosexual."

"How do you know he is homosexual?"

"Because he is sexually attracted to other men."

"But what makes him sexually attracted to other men?"

"Homosexuality."

Our language then has created a condition, a trait, or a sexual orientation called homosexuality and we talked about it as though it has the power to make people do, think or feel in certain specific ways.

Our language can have an even more profound influence on individuals who are unusually emotionally sensitive, self analytical, and perfectionistic. People who experience same-sex attraction often say things like; "When I found out I was gay . . ." The implications of this simple phrase are critically important. It literally means that *before* a person had any homosexual thoughts, feelings, or behaviors, he was *already* a "gay" person. Therefore when homosexual thoughts, feelings, or behaviors began to occur in his life they were perceived as *symptoms* of a deeper condition that *already* existed in him, the condition being "gay" or "homosexual."

People who are unusually emotionally sensitive, intensely introspective, and highly perfectionistic are especially distressed by the idea that their homosexual feelings are caused by an innate condition, and this idea can greatly influence how they respond to those feelings. As an example, I had a client many years ago who had no homosexual thoughts, feelings, or behaviors until he was in his early twenties (this is unusual most men experience these feelings by early adolescence). To support a friend who was dealing with feelings of same-sex attraction, he attended a fireside for men struggling with this issue. During the fireside a number of men gave testimonials describing their struggles and what their lives had been like. Hearing these testimonials, this young man began to think, "That sounds a lot like me! I wonder if I might be gay." Well, he had to know. It would be bad enough to be gay, but he certainly didn't want to be gay and not know it! So, in order to find out if he was gay, he tried fantasizing sexually about men and, sure enough, he found that it could be very arousing. Now he knew the truth; he knew that he, too, was gay.

He never thought to himself, "I just taught myself to do something; I have taught myself a new pattern of arousal; I just trained myself to respond in a new way." Thoughts such as these never crossed his mind. Why? Because such explanations were simply not available to him; they were not part of his culture's language. He had grown up in a culture that had taught him very clearly that there were basically two kinds of people; straight and heterosexual or gay and homosexual. He further understood from his culture that if you became aroused by sexual thoughts about other men you fit into that category called homosexual. Not only do you *belong* in that category, it is *being* in that category that is causing you to become aroused by men. Therefore, the only explanation available to him was, "I just found out who and what I am, and I am gay." This false idea became a critical factor in this young man's life. I believe this same false idea has unfortunately influenced many other young men to interpret their emotional or sexual responses in the same way.

Another mistake we make as a result of the way we use language, is that we take metaphors too literally. We use metaphors when we speak of things that are not directly observable by our senses, such as our emotions, urges, and desires. The "need" metaphor is often used as people talk about same-sex attraction. There is a lot of talk about "unmet emotional needs." The word "need" once indicated a necessity, such as a physical resource that we must have in order to live. A "need" is often evidenced by continued urges and cravings until we get enough of *it*. So when we speak of "emotional needs" we elevate our desires beyond the level of a want, wish, craving or hope, to the level of *necessity*.

"Orientation" is another metaphor that we use when we talk about same-sex attraction. "Orientation" began as a geographic term. A person was "oriented" according to the direction he was facing and his position relative to the geography around him. In our culture we speak of individuals as having "a sexual orientation." This "sexual orientation" is perceived as a very powerful, innate cause that determines what we will be sexually attracted to. A "sexual orientation" is not something you *do*, it is something you *have*. Great importance is sometimes placed on knowing what your "sexual orientation" is.

"Drive" is another metaphor often used in reference to sexual feelings. The word *drive* originally referred to the act of impelling, forcing or urging forward, with specific to cattle or other livestock. As such it referred to something being urged forward by an agent outside of and therefore out of the control of the thing being driven. This sense of being pushed, prodded or forced against one's will, or at least without consent, was retained when the word drive was later adopted to refer to various physical or psychological cravings, including sexual desires.

Do we really have a sex drive? I often talk to young men who struggle with various kinds of strong sexual impulses prior to serving a mission; then, right at the peak of their supposed "sexual drive," many of them choose to serve an LDS mission and often these impulses create little if any problem for them for two years. I wonder, "Where did that incredibly powerful force, that 'drive,' go for two years?" Perhaps that "sexual drive" was not simply something they *had* but more something they *did*. Perhaps they had simply chosen to do something different for two years.

A few years ago, a newspaper columnist suggested that abstinence is not a realistic expectation because the sexual drive is the strongest drive in nature, next to hunger. That comparison allows me to introduce a different way of thinking about same-sex attraction, using the example of hunger. I experience hunger as a pain in my stomach, a very unpleasant sensation. For me, that sensation happens to be very similar, if not identical, to the sensation I feel when I'm nervous or anxious about something. There have been a number of times in my life when I have said to my wife, "I'm really nervous about something. My stomach is in knots. I don't know why I'm so uptight." My wife will then turned to me and say, "Have you eaten today?" I will then look down somewhat sheepishly and mutter "No, I haven't had time." She will then roll her eyes, shake her head and say, "Sit down at the table." She will then feed me, and guess what? That uncomfortable feeling in my stomach goes on way. What happened? I had a physical sensation in my stomach, but in and of itself, it had no meaning until I assigned a meaning to it, or interpreted it. Sometimes we say, I told myself a story about it. I told myself a story about nervousness when really a story about being hungry would have been more helpful.

Now *if* when I had felt that discomfort in my stomach I told myself that I was *hungry*; what would come into my mind? Well, most likely it would be food. For me it might be pizza. I love pizza, with lots of cheese, pepperoni, sausage, and ham. I don't remember ever choosing to love pizza and I've really tried not to love pizza. I've been trying to lose some weight and I have a family history of heart disease. So I tell myself "Yuck, that stuff is disgusting; all that fat and grease is just revolting." Well that might work for a while but when that pain in my stomach returns and I get within smelling distance of a hot pizza, watch out! At times like that, I begin to believe that I really have a "pizza drive".

I don't believe that food, and specifically pizza, are the only possible stories that I could tell about the pain in my stomach. Certainly if I had grown up in another country I might not think of pizza when I feel the pain in my stomach. When I feel that sensation, I might also think, "I'm fasting. I'm trying to become closer to my Heavenly Father." I might think, "I'm on a diet and I'm going to lose weight." Maybe I am on a hunger strike and the pain in my stomach represents defiance or anger. On the other hand, I

might interpret those feelings and say, "My life is completely out of control and hopeless. I have no control over anything. The only thing I can really control in my life is what I eat. In fact, when I feel anxious and out of control, I can feel that sensation in my stomach and it soothes me. It gives me a sense of control in my life until it reduces my anxiety, and I literally become addicted to that feeling in my stomach." In an extreme case that thinking might lead me to starve myself to death. This process is a major cause of Anorexia.

I use this example because when we talk about issues of sexuality involving interpretation or assigning meaning, people are sometimes offended. They experience their sexual desires and cravings as very real and very powerful. To say that these desires are the result of interpretation or "telling a story" seems to be dismissing their struggle as somehow their fault and as something that should be easy to change. But this is not true. Our interpretations, "our stories," are incredibly powerful and often very difficult to change. Try to not like your favorite food; try to not have feelings about your country or your home; try to have no emotional response to your parents; try to not care if a friend snubs you. The meanings we make and the stories we tell about our world, *are our world*. They are the means by which we understand our experiences, who we are, and what we are.

When we talk about hunger in this way, it feels a lot less like some innate, physical "drive" and more like an experience that involves meaning-making, and interpretation. The same thing is true when it comes to sexuality, except that instead of having an unpleasant physical sensation, we have the ability to become strongly sexually aroused, an incredibly pleasant sensation. But I believe that, like hunger, this sensation, in and of itself, has no meaning until we interpret and place meaning upon it.

The meanings we place upon our sexual arousal vary greatly between individuals, cultures and over time. These meanings are greatly influenced by the culture around us. For example, if I grew up in the South Pacific a hundred years ago, what physical attributes of women might I have been attracted to? I would likely be attracted to heavy women, because being heavy meant that women were healthy and well-off. In fact, the same thing is still true today in some places. In some places men are sexually attracted to women who stretch out their necks with brass rings, or shave their heads, or stretch out their earlobes, or scar their faces. These forms of beauty have no real attraction for men in our culture but because many in those cultures tell a different story, the men in those cultures can be strongly aroused by those things.

Again, if I took a beauty queen of today and entered her into a beauty contest back in 1930, the audience might view her as comic relief. She would look strange and out of place—too tall, gangly and so skinny she

looked half starved. Not only that, she would have too much of a tan, like a common field laborer. Spectators might just hoot and holler and slap their knees. On the other hand a beauty queen from 1930 would be perceived today as too short, pudgy, and pale. Understanding the strong cultural influences that shape our sexuality helps us to see sexual desire not as simply some innate and unchanging physical drive or orientation but as something that develops through meaning making and interpretation.

This understanding helps us to see the mistake that some who struggle with same-sex attraction make by over-interpreting themselves as being vastly different from other people. All of the men I know who have been successful in overcoming homosexual behaviors say that they first had to learn they are not as different from other men as they thought they were.

Sometimes I am asked, "If you think we can become straight, do you also think you could become gay?" My response is, "Probably. I would prefer not to—it seems to cause a lot of hassle in people's lives. I've got my own hassles." But I do believe that most people can probably significantly alter their sexual desires. That's the good news.

There is some not-so-good news, however. Over the years I have often told my clients that the only real difference between them and me is that they can remember how to be sexually attracted to other men and I can't. They can remember the story or interpretation of same-sex attraction. This is the hard part. If we saw same-sex attraction as a disease we would talk about a cure. If we saw it as a condition we would seek to find ways of treating the condition. If we thought of it as wound we would talk about helping it to heal. But if sexual attraction is a memory, if it is something that you know, and can remember how to do, how do you get rid of a memory? How do you forget; how do you make amnesia happen?

The powerful memories of sexual attraction can be compared to learning a language. If I grew up speaking English but wanted to learn Spanish, I might study very hard, immerse myself in the Spanish language, and avoid speaking and thinking in English. I might even move to a Spanish-speaking county. But how long would it take for English to be completely eradicated from my memory? Would it ever happen? If this high standard of complete eradication were the definition of "change," no one could change their language or much else about themselves.

I tell my clients, "For you to completely lose the ability to ever be sexually aroused by another man"—now losing the ability is different from losing the compulsion or the habit; and here we're talking about losing the ability so you just couldn't do it—"to do that would be about as easy as if I were to say, 'Rudolph the Red-Nosed . . . ,' and for you not to think 'Reindeer.'" Is that even possible?

For most of us who grew up singing "Rudolph the Red Nosed Reindeer" this is simply a well established pathway among the neurons in our brain. It is something we know how to do and it would be very difficult not to do it. But what if you were highly motivated? What if someone offered you one million dollars on the condition that in one year you could hear the words *Rudolph the Red Nosed*, and *reindeer* would *not* be the first thing to come to your mind. How would you try to accomplish that? Well, many people say that they would try to substitute some other word for reindeer. So you could sing, "Rudolph the Red Nosed Buffalo" a thousand times, then a hundred thousand times, then a million times. Eventually *buffalo* would come into your mind more readily than *reindeer*.

But every once in a while, seemingly out of nowhere, through some random firing of neurons in the brain, *reindeer* may come back into your mind. Now how would you respond? If you were emotionally sensitive, very introspective, and strongly perfectionistic, you might react like this: "Reindeer, . . . oh, no, reindeer! I said *reindeer* again; I can't believe it! I still have this *reindeer* orientation! It's always going to be *reindeer*! I can't believe it! All of my prayers, all of the therapy, all of the work, it's ruined—it's *reindeer, reindeer, reindeer*! I'm always going to be a *reindeer* guy—it's *reindeer*! It's going to be *reindeer* my whole life! I can't believe it. I'll never know anything but *reindeer*!" Now what did I just do? (One client said, "Lost a million bucks!") Instead of saying *reindeer*, once, I have said it a dozen times with great emotional emphasis. That is what many who struggle with same-sex attraction do. In therapy, we try to help them interpret their memories in a different way, something like this: ".....*Rudolph, the Red-Nosed Reindeer*. . . . Oh, I used to do that a lot. . . . *Rudolph, the Red-Nosed Buffalo*," and then move on.

Using the language metaphor again, while I'm speaking Spanish an English word might pop into my head, but instead of having a strong emotional reaction and feeling that all of my efforts to learn and speak Spanish have failed, I might think, "Oh, English, I remember what it was like to speak English, but I'm speaking Spanish now, and that suits me just fine," and then move on speaking Spanish. This metaphor helps decrease emotional reactivity to the continuing memory of same-sex attractions.

Defusing emotional reactivity is a key component in treating the issue. Doing this however, can be difficult. Since same-sex attraction is a "condition" these individuals strongly want to overcome, they believe that they are supposed to fight it with all of their heart. They also believe that if they have a strong emotional reaction against their feelings of same-sex attraction, they are doing what any good person would do. But the strong emotional reactions just digs them deeper and deeper, like a man struggling in quicksand, they are pulled lower and lower.

Development of Same-Sex Attraction

If what I am saying is true, if same-sex attraction is an interpretation, a story someone tells themselves then how does this story develop? Why do some men find themselves sexually attracted to other men? How does it get started? While no two men have exactly the same experience, there are some fairly common patterns. I want to describe two of them.

First Pattern

The first pattern I will describe is somewhat less common. It fits for only about half of the clients I talk to. But when it does fit, it is very important to understand. It begins when a boy is very young, in pre-adolescence or early adolescence. This young man, who is unusually emotionally sensitive, self analytical, and perfectionistic, begins to hear about chastity, sexual morality, purity, and moral cleanliness. He makes up his mind, at a very deep level, that he is not going to think sexual thought about girls. He sees them as too pure, too sacred to think about in *that* way. It is likely however, that he has heard little if any discussion about not thinking sexual thoughts about other boys. He may also assume that since he is allowed to see other boys in locker rooms or other situations and that he himself is a boy and can look at himself in the mirror, that seeing or thinking about other boys must not be that bad. As a result, when this young man hits puberty and begins to have the experience of strong sexual arousal, he is actually less resistive, feels less guilt, in thinking sexually about other boys than he would thinking about girls.

I commonly asked clients which they would feel most guilty about: having an explicit sexual fantasy about a women or having a similarly explicit sexual fantasy about a man. About half of them tell me that they would feel more guilt fantasizing about a woman. The majority of those who feel that way say that they would feel two or three times more guilty fantasizing about a woman. So when this pattern fits, it has a very strong effect.

Second Pattern

The second pattern I would like to describe in the development of same-sex attraction is more common than the first one. It fits for a significant majority of men. It is a little bit more complex, and it sometimes goes hand in hand with the first pattern.

The men I counsel who experienced same-sex attraction often say something like "from an early age I have always felt different from or rejected by other men or boys." For some men, this has to do with their relationship with their father; they felt distant from their father or felt that

their father didn't approve of them. Some did not like their father, and did not want to be like him. But for many other men, same-sex attraction does not seem to have much to do with their father at all. Some people believe this problem is always about the father, but many men I have counseled say they had good, often very good, relationships with their fathers.

Instead, for many individuals I counsel with, feeling different or rejected had to do with peers or sometimes siblings. Some men were made fun of or teased. They may have been called "gay" or "fag" or other kinds of names when they were growing up. Some were left out of activities; some simply did not like traditional activities like sports or cars or other kinds of things that boys are supposed to like. Some were more drawn to artistic endeavors, and many have been more expressive and more verbal. They may have excelled in art, music, drama or other less stereotypically male activities.

So from a very young age, they felt different or rejected by other males. Because of this, they began to focus on other boys or men very intensely, almost obsessively. That intense focus most often took one or more of three different forms:

First, they may have focused on other boys with envy and comparisons to themselves: "Why can't I be like other guys? I am so different! Why can't I have that guy's good looks, that guy's muscles, that guy's body, that guy's sexual development, that guy's popularity?"

Second, they may have focused on other boys through their desire to belong. They saw other boys in groups of friends and buddies laughing, talking, and roughhousing, and they wanted to belong, to be included, to fit in. They wanted to be liked and cared about.

Third, they may have focused on other boys with fascination and curiosity. They found them intriguing. They may have been intrigued by their masculinity or by their sexual development. They may have been intrigued by them aesthetically—they simply found them to be beautiful. So in one or more of these three different ways—and often in all three—they became very focused on other men.

Next came puberty, I'm sorry for being a little bit explicit here, but this is an explicit topic and to really understand what happens in the lives of these young men, we need to be specific. Young adolescent boys are very easily sexually aroused. Usually by the age of 12 they are becoming aroused many times each day. They may become aroused by any change in their physical environment, by any significant shift in their emotions, or for no reason at all. They may think, "I'm hot, I get aroused; I'm cold, I get aroused; my pants are too tight, I get aroused; my pants are too loose, I get aroused; I need to use the bathroom, I get aroused; the car ride is bumpy, I get aroused." Or maybe they think "I'm nervous, I get aroused;

I'm excited, I get aroused; I'm relaxed, I get aroused; I'm happy, I get aroused." Or for no reason at all they just get aroused multiple times during the day. I had one sixteen year old client say to me once "I'm doing much better at not having sexual fantasies, so I just have the normal arousal, about every forty-five minutes."

At this stage in their life, this arousal is what I would call "undifferentiated." It is not connected to any particular gender or even to other people in general. They simply get aroused a lot. The majority boys at this stage of life are almost bored with other boys: "I've been playing football with these guys; we've been hanging out together; there's nothing new, exciting or intriguing there. But those girls over there, they're shaped differently, they talk differently, and most importantly, my culture sends me all kinds of messages about sexuality, romance, girlfriends, marriage and sex"—and so this arousal which is frequent and strong, but which up to this point has been undifferentiated, soon begins to focus on girls.

Most boys become sexually attracted to girls for the same reason they speak English: it's what their culture trains them to do. As in language acquisition, a growing child eventually acquires the ability to speak, or, in the case of sexuality, to get aroused, but the specific ways in which these general abilities will eventually be expressed is most strongly influenced by their cultural surroundings.

So what happens in the life of young men who begins to struggle with same-sex attraction? What happens differently for them? Well, for a significant minority of boys their focus at this stage isn't on girls; instead, their focus is still on other boys because of envy, wanting to belong, fascination, and curiosity. It is the other boys they want to be like. It is the other boys they want to be close to and accepted by. It is the other boys they are fascinated by and have strong emotional reactions to. So eventually it is the other boys they begin to be aroused by.

In my experience, these are the two most common ways that a young man begins to experience sexual attraction to other young men: anxiety or guilt about having sexual feelings towards girls; and intense focus on other boys at the onset of puberty. It is not uncommon for significant numbers of adolescent boys to experience some sexual arousal towards other boys. But for most boys this experience of same-sex arousal has little lasting significance. They may notice it, but they quickly shrugged it off as unimportant, not worth worrying about.

We are concerned, about are the boys who *get stuck* there; the ones for whom this experience of same-sex arousal becomes increasingly frequent and intense during their adolescent years. To understand why this happens for some young men, it is important to remember that we are talking about those who have three characteristics in common: they are unusually

emotionally sensitive, they are extraordinarily introspective or self analytical and they care intensely about doing things right. When these young men notice that they are beginning to be sexually aroused by other men, five things happen. For some these things happen very quickly; for others they may occur slowly over a period of years.

Over-Focus and Over-Interpretation. First, these young men over focus and over interpret their experience of sexual arousal towards other men. Thinking about their attraction to men becomes a huge part of their life. They think and worry about it constantly. They worry about the future, they worry about what will happen to them, they worry about why they feel this way, they worry that they are evil, they worry about whether other people can tell, they worry about their standing with God, they wonder if it will get better, they worry that it will get worse, and they spend an enormous amount of time trying to figure it all out.

Eventually, at some point during their adolescent years, they reach the point that their thinking and worrying about this issue consumes more of their focus and mental energy than every other thing in their lives combined. They worry more about this than they do about school, church, family, friends, hobbies, interests, recreation and other activities all put together. When I describe this level of worry to my clients, they often nod their head, their eyes tear up, and they say, "Yeah, absolutely, absolutely; it concerns me more than everything else combined."

When you focus that much on something, does it get larger or smaller? It gets larger. Here is another metaphor that I use with clients. I hold up my clipboard and suggest, "Let's say that this clipboard represents the fact that you get aroused by other guys, and let's say that everything else in this room represents all the other things in your life: church, school, family, friends, etc. here's what you've done." I then look carefully around, noticing all the different objects in the room and then suddenly, when I notice the clipboard I grab it intensely with a look of shock and horror on my face. I stare directly at it as if studying it in terrified amazement, while moving it slowly but steadily closer and closer to my eyes. Finally I smack it against my face, covering my eyes, and hold it there. Then I say "suddenly this is the biggest thing in the room. I can see the other things out of the corner of my eyes but this is the biggest thing in my world. This is the central fact of my life. This is what I wake up to every morning." I then tell them, "This is what you have done with the issue of same-sex attraction in your life." At this point many men begin to understand for the first time, the role that over focus and over interpretation have played in making this problem the thing that dominates their life.

Self-Loathing. The second thing that happens when young men begin to feel sexual attraction towards other men is self-loathing. They develop strong negative feelings about themselves. From their earliest years they

have wanted to be as good as possible, to get everything right. Now they feel as though they have the worst thoughts, feelings and behaviors they could possibly have. They tell themselves things like, "This is disgusting; I am disgusting. If anyone knew what I have been thinking and feeling they would find it revolting; they would find me revolting. If anyone knew this about this they could not possibly love me."

Isolation and Secrecy. The third thing that occurs when young men begin dealing with feelings of same-sex attraction is isolation and secrecy. They think, "Nobody must know about this; I cannot tell anybody. I will make it go away by willpower; I will pray it away; I will force it out of my heart and my mind—but I cannot tell anybody." I have talked to many men who have kept their feelings a complete secret for years or even decades. Not only do they keep the attraction a secret, but they also expend a great deal of mental and emotional energy in creating a social façade. Some of these men begin to act shy or withdrawn but in my experience the great majority of them become what I call "world class fakers." They walk down the halls at school or at church smiling and greeting people as though nothing were wrong. If you ask their bishop or their seminary teacher, "How is that kid doing?" He would respond, "What a terrific kid! I wish we had a dozen kids just like him. If only all these kids were as on top of things as he is." No one has any idea of the intense emotional pain and turmoil that this young man walks around with every day of his life. Such young men suppose that if anyone really does love and accept them it can only be because that person doesn't know the real truth about them. They feel they have to be very careful about how close they let other people get to them because those people might figure out the "secret." So the weeks and the months and the years go by and life goes on. At church everybody's complimenting them and telling their parents how wonderful they are. Nobody knows what this young man thinks about himself: how bad he really is.

Compulsive Sexuality. The fourth thing that occurs in the lives of these young men is some level of compulsive sexuality. For some young men this may simply mean indulging in sexual fantasies about other men. But for most of these men it includes masturbation to homosexual fantasies, often the use of gay pornography and for some, acting out sexually with other men. Why does this happen? I believe that for most of these men in the answer can be given very simply: "I'm having some sort of negative emotions—I'm feeling lonely; I'm feeling guilty; I'm feeling unworthy; I'm feeling tired; I'm feeling anxious; I'm feeling bored; I'm feeling some negative emotion—and I know how to make it go away. I know something that will replace it with feelings that are exciting and intensely pleasurable and intriguing to me, that make me feel close to other men, if only in my fantasies." That is how many young men turn to fantasy, masturbation,

pornography, and sometimes, sexual activity with other men. This scenario is very common; some spend much of their waking hours in sexual thoughts and fantasies.

The use of sexual arousal to medicate the emotional pain of life can soon become an addiction. When they try to overcome these compulsive sexual thoughts or fantasies, they become like an alcoholic trying to give up alcohol while walking around with a bottle of whiskey open in front of him with a straw in the bottle and the other end of the straw in his mouth. This young man doesn't have to go anywhere or purchase anything to obtain the pain-killing pleasure; he just turns his mind to it and he can experience that rush of pleasant feeling again and again.

The problem with this kind of self medication is that it often creates a self-perpetuating cycle. I often ask clients to think about an alcoholic sitting on the street corner. He looks down in the gutter and says to himself, "Alcohol has ruined my life, my family has all left me and won't speak to me, my career has been destroyed, my health has been ruined and I have no friends. I think I need a drink!" In this way most addictions create their own need. But in the case of addictive same-sex behaviors it is as though a man says, "I'm evil, I'm unworthy, I'm fag or I'm a queer, and no would love me if they knew this about me. I think I need a fantasy!"

When discussing the role that this compulsive sexual behavior has played in their lives, I often ask clients if they play a musical instrument. Many will say something like, "Yes, I play the piano." I will then ask them, "If you had spent as many hours practicing the piano in the last ten years as you have spent thinking sexual thoughts about men, how good would you be?" Most of them laugh and respond, "I would be famous" or "I would be playing in concerts all over the world." I then point out to them, "So you practice and practice and practice sexual thoughts and feelings towards men, and then wonder 'where are these strong feelings and desires are coming from?' " I then tell them, that a major reason why they have these feelings is simply because they have practiced them for so long. It is simply something they know how to do and they know it well.

Religious Turmoil. Lastly, these young men experience some sort of religious turmoil or crisis as a result of their struggle. Typically, they have been extremely devout, but they become hurt and wounded. They wonder, "Why have my prayers gone unanswered? Why, when I needed it the most, has the gospel not been there and saved me from this problem?" Some lose their testimonies and leave the Church; some become ultra-orthodox and try very, very hard; and some switch back and forth between faith and hopelessness.

Can you see why a young man who is emotionally sensitive, introspective, and who wants to be good, gets caught up in this pattern? It

is the introspective young man who over-interprets what is happening to him and focuses on it incessantly. It is the perfectionistic young man who wants to be good but who loathes and hates himself because he believes he is not good. It is the young man who is emotionally sensitive who isolates himself because he cannot bear the thought or the pain of anyone else knowing about this problem. He shields himself from all kinds of healthy, intimate relationships, as well as from those who might help him.

To review this second pattern, imagine a young man saying, "I felt different from or rejected by other men. I focused on other men because of envy, wanting to belong, or fascination and curiosity. I hit adolescence when I was strongly and easily aroused by all kinds of different emotions and feelings. I was having strong emotional responses to men, and so I focused on men more and more and became aroused by them. When that happened, I over-focused and over-interpreted. I hated myself because of it. I isolated myself socially and emotionally and kept it a secret. I developed some compulsive sexual behaviors to medicate all of this pain, and I then developed a religious crisis in my life."

Steps to Change

Now the question is what to do about it, how do these men change? Men who are successful at overcoming this problem do so by reversing the five patterns of behavior described above. These five patterns of behavior constitute the "context" in which these young men experience their feelings of same-sex attraction. It is this "context" which gives the experience of same-sex attraction its meaning. It is this meaning which solidifies the experience of same-sex attraction. It is this meaning which also creates all of the pain associated with same-sex attraction.

It has been my experience that "overcoming" same-sex attraction consists of changing the context in which it is experienced and interpreted, not in the complete elimination of the ability to be aroused by other men. This is why the approach which I advocate for helping these young men is referred to as a "context specific" approach. It is "specific" because the specific nature and intensity of each of these five patterns of behavior can vary greatly between individuals. The aim of a this approach is not simply to change how an individual feels about their same-sex attraction; it is to decrease how often and how intensely men experience same-sex attraction.

My experience has been that when the meaning of same-sex attraction changes, the frequency of same-sex attraction decreases dramatically. This accomplished as the five behavioral patterns described are reversed.

Stop Over-Focusing and Over-Interpretation

Men who are successful stop over-focusing and over-interpreting. In discussing how to do this, I typically use another metaphor that often rings true to them: "When people begin this battle with same-sex attraction, they think it's going to be like this: There's a terrible dragon over here. He has caused untold pain and misery in my life. I must kill him. So I draw my sword and I go to do battle, and he knocks me down, and I knock him down, and we fight and we fight, and it's a terrible battle, but finally, because I'm so valiant and so diligent, I get a couple of good blows in, I drive my sword into his heart, and he goes down. Then I collapse in exhaustion, covered with dirt and mud and blood and sweat, but finally victorious." That's how they picture the battle, and that's how they've been trying to fight it.

Unfortunately, this approach never seems to work. The dragon never seems to die. Those who are actually successful would describe it very differently they would say: "There's a terrible dragon over there; he has caused untold pain and misery in my life. I draw my sword, he lunges at me, and I fend him off. I keep my eye on him, he is dangerous, but then I start to back up a little bit, I back up some more, I back up some more, and I keep backing up, and finally I turn and walk away from him; I walk and I walk and I keep walking, and the farther I walk, the smaller he becomes in the distance until he becomes irrelevant in my life -- he just doesn't matter anymore."

While the idea of walking away may seem very logical and practical many men who struggle with same-sex attraction are very uncomfortable with it because *if you walk a way the dragon is still alive*. Remember my first client who asked, "Can you promise me that if I enter into therapy and try to overcome this problem, I will *never* have any of these feelings again for the rest of my life?" Those who want to conquer same-sex attraction want it to be gone completely, vanquished and completely destroyed. They want to see the dragon dead, its head mounted on the wall; they want to read the coroner's report and know the exact time and cause of death. They cannot tolerate even the slightest remnant of it in their lives, and that desire simply keeps them there, fighting the dragon. For many men who deal with this issue, their attitude has been "if this is still a problem for me I must not have focused on it enough, analyzed it enough, worried about it enough, felt enough guilt about it, been upset with myself enough." So they keep fighting the dragon.

I had one client who had not seen me for several months when he called and made an appointment. He sat down in my office and said "days go by, sometimes even weeks, with out my even thinking about this problem. Then I feel guilty and think I need to go back and see Jeff again and work on that problem some more." I responded, "Really, what would happen if you never thought about it again?" He thought for a moment and

said hesitantly, as if wondering if he could possibly be correct, "Well, I... I suppose that would be good, wouldn't it?" I said, "Yes, I think that would be very good." Remember the dip board? Remember Rudolph the Red Nosed Reindeer? Men who are successful at dealing with the issue of same-sex attraction move on with their lives by not focusing so intensely on the problem.

Decrease Self Focus

These men must give up self-loathing and in general stop focusing so much on themselves. I have never met a man who successfully hated himself out of homosexuality or compulsive sexuality. In fact, those who hate themselves the most are universally the ones who are most stuck. People who successfully deal with this challenge stop worrying so much about themselves. They develop not what I would refer to as high self-esteem, but something like self-forgetfulness, or perhaps the gospel virtue of hope. They hope and have a belief in the redemption of Christ.

Connect with Others

These men must also give up their isolation and secrecy by telling significant people in their lives about their challenges. It is not necessary or helpful to tell lots of people, but telling a handful of significant people is valuable—usually parents or a spouse, a bishop, a counselor, maybe some close friends. It is essential to have somebody else know about it; then they can talk to someone else about it.

This act alone is incredibly agonizing for many of them, and yet it is incredibly liberating. They say, "I cannot believe people could respond so positively to me. I cannot believe they still care about me or love me or like me." They were quite certain they would be rejected because they had rejected themselves for so long. To a large degree their fear of others response to this problem was a direct reflection of their own response. In order to respond differently to themselves they had to first experience the compassion others would offer them.

For some this is the most difficult step they need to take. Once they talk openly about it, however, the nature of the problem changes; it can no longer be a secret so deep and so dark that it is unspeakable. Those who are successful also develop or expand, healthy, nonsexual relationships with other men and women, and they become more socially comfortable, more open and honest, more direct, and more caring.

Restore Chastity

In order for men to succeed in overcoming same-sex attraction they must overcome compulsive or addictive sexual behaviors, and for some this is the greatest and most difficult challenge of all. For some it becomes the major focus of therapy for a significant period of time. At times our Father in Heaven seems to be stingy about taking this problem away from people, but he is often very generous in showing them the very next step they should take, so long as they humbly and consistently ask. Depending on the length and severity of the sexual addiction this issue becomes a significant problem in and of itself. Little lasting progress can occur unless this issue is dealt with.

Spiritual Growth

Finally, those who are truly successful in this process of overcoming same-sex attraction, experience a spiritual change in their lives. Men who are successful attribute it to having been spiritually born again. I tell my clients, "Your goal has got to be nothing more or less than to be born again through the Holy Ghost, and to have the desire for evil removed from you."

Of course, then the question arises, "Well, that's great; I've been praying for that. So can't we just skip to that part and forget all the stuff about getting on with my life and not focusing too much on the problem, and learning to stop hating myself and to love other people, and being honest and open, and overcoming the compulsive sexual behavior—let's just skip all that and jump to the born-again part and we'll be done with it." But it doesn't work that way. These efforts *prepare* them for that final step in overcoming. These changes soften their heart, open their understanding, and increase their compassion and their humility. They create the necessary space in their life that allows this final change to happen.

Changing these patterns is difficult, but it is possible. I have seen many men do it and move on with lives that are filled with happiness and joy, but it is not easy. It is a difficult trial. These men are in the same position as everyone else: they must rely on our Father in Heaven and the Atonement of Jesus Christ, or they will not be successful. But they have to change the way they think about it, they have to change their perception of what living the gospel means, because simply hating themselves and striving so diligently has not worked for them, but understanding mercy and moving away from these behaviors, walking away from the dragon, seems to be helpful and has been for many, many men.

I have seen men expressed gratitude for the growth and understanding that has occurred in their lives as a result of their faithful efforts in overcoming this problem. Many of them at one point will say, "This was the problem that drove me to my knees, which humbled me and

made me realize that I stand redeemed by Christ or I do not stand at all." In order for this change to happen most men who struggle with same-sex attraction need to develop a deeper and broader understanding of the gospel of Jesus Christ. For most of them, and for many of the people who love them and want to help them, this problem often seems to be "off the edge of the gospel map". It can be very confusing. It seems to contradict our understanding of agency. It appeared to be a cruel thing to have to endure. It often seems to run contrary to our ideas of who and what we are. In order to make sense out of this painful and confusing issue we may need to expand our understanding of many issues: the gospel, the nature of agency, what it means to be redeemed, the role of sexuality in our lives and what it means to love and support one another in this lost and fallen world.

For example, it important for these men to understand *both* justice *and* mercy. It has been my experience that men who struggle with same-sex attraction are sometimes men who comprehend justice, but who fall short in their comprehension of mercy. They understand the parts of the gospel that say "be perfect, obey every commandment, be valiant, repent of every sin, take responsibility, don't make excuses, etc." these principles resonate in the hearts of many of these men. What they do not understand as well are the parts of the gospel that deal with mercy, grace, redemption, the Atonement and the love of Christ. These key principles are more difficult for many of these men. They simply don't resonate as deeply for them as justice does.

Ironically, these men could give a great Sacrament meeting talk on mercy because they are generally smart and they know how all the words fit together, but in their own lives accepting mercy is often very difficult. Sometimes their approach seems to be "I can accept the Atonement of Jesus Christ after I've repented and overcome this. After I've finally and completely repented, then I can accept the Atonement to dean up the mess I made along the way. But not right now, not while I'm so bad. I've got to overcome this on my own, and then the Atonement will be available to me." It's the equivalent of saying, "I can accept the Atonement as soon as soon as I prove I don't need it."

I sometimes tell clients that there are two possible errors that can result from spiritual perfectionism. The first is that they will become very discouraged and hate themselves for their repeated failures. This is bad, but the second error is even worse. It is to believe, to some degree, that they have succeeded; to see themselves as in some way less in need of forgiveness and redemption than others. Sometimes I wonder about the role that same-sex attraction plays in the spiritual lives of these men. Many of them are men who are intelligent, talented and gifted in many ways. I wonder, if it were not for this problem, whether they might have been men who would have been in serious danger of committing this second error. But

here in the middle of there often well organized and high achieving lives, the Lord allows an overwhelming problem to develop. Sometimes these men wonder if they can be saved *in spite* of this problem. I tell them that they may be saved *because* of this problem or at least through their response to this problem.

I often joke with clients as we read the Lord's words to Mormon "if men come unto me I will show unto them their weakness." I tell them, "I don't know about you, but to me that sounds more like a threat than an invitation." But then we move on and read what is probably one of the most beautiful and hopeful verses in Scripture:

And if men come unto me I will show unto them their weakness. I give unto men weakness that they may be humble; and my grace is sufficient for all men that humble themselves before me; for if they humble themselves before me, and have faith in me, then will I make weak things become strong unto them. (Ether 12: 27)

I have had the privilege of seeing these words become a reality in the lives of many men. In the process my own faith in the gospel of Jesus Christ has been strengthened.

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