

## Knowing is the First Step

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Have you ever thought about gay people? Do you have any gay friends? I'm sure that everyone knows gay people, but how many of you have paid any attention to them? I never did because I did not have any opportunities to think about them, and teachers never taught me about gay people at school. I think a lot of people are just like me, especially students who are high school age or younger.

I have a close friend I have known since we were in elementary school. One day, he confessed to me that he is gay. While he was talking, he sometimes got lost for words and almost cried for fear that I would not accept him as a best friend anymore once I knew he was gay. When he had finished, I said to him, "So, is that it? It doesn't matter if you are gay or not. We're still best friends." He seemed relieved when I said that to him, but he still worried about his future and felt lonely because he didn't have any gay friends. I had no idea how to help him because I had never met gay people before.

So I did some research to see if I could find a place where he could meet people who were just like him and could sympathize with him. Then, I found a community called "LGBT." "LGBT" stands for "lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender." This community was established by two mothers whose children were gay. They wanted to offer a place where people like their children can meet others who have the same struggles.

When we went to the community's meeting, there were many people with unhappy stories. There was a gay man who had been bullied by his classmates when he was young because he is gay. There was also a lesbian girl, who, when she realized she was a lesbian, could not accept herself and blamed it on her parents. Eventually, she told her sister about being lesbian and her sister said, "You are lucky. It means you're special. There is nothing wrong about it."

Yet, no one in the community had been able to come out to their friends and parents. They were only able to be honest with the other members in this community. Naturally, when someone realizes that they are gay, but they have no gay friends around them, they cannot tell their parents. Furthermore, in Japan it is hard for them to find a gay or LGBT community, and even if they find one, they are afraid to go to the meeting. So, they suffer by themselves.

These days, the LGBT community holds a rainbow parade every year because they want people to know about gay issues. However, some people are against this parade. In fact, in its first year, about 100 people demonstrated against it. The LGBT community tried to educate everyone about gay issues, but people still have the wrong idea. Many people think that gay people are different because of TV shows or magazines in which gay people are often made fun of. This is why people only see their sexuality in a negative way even though they have other good traits that they should be proud of. This, I think, leads many people to have a very narrow-minded view of gay people.

"Japan is hard to live in. School life is painful. I am the wrong one. I feel like I'm lying to myself." What do you think when you hear these words? This is what my friend said to me. Some gay people are still suffering like him because they have the same kind of feelings. You may think this is too much to say, but it is real. Many gay people think they cannot be accepted in Japan.

I know that it is difficult to think about gay people with your friends. Some people wrongly believe that gay people may have a bad influence on others because of the stereotypes coming from TV shows and other media. So, it is hard for them to gain a better understanding about gay people. That is why we need to have more opportunities while we are students to be educated about gay people and their struggles. Only then can we help people like my friend and the others who are suffering. It will take a long time, but if we start to pay attention to gay people, I think it will be

easier for them to be accepted, and the world will become an easier place for them to live in.