

It Gets Better: Coming Out, Overcoming Bullying, and Creating a Life Worth Living

By Dan Savage and Terry Miller

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Reviewed by:

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The adolescent world is a mixture of angst and excitement; for adolescents who are gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgendered, the world can be unbearable. Often the victims of bullying, taunting, and ostracism, many teens attempt, or sadly, commit suicide rather than deal with their emerging sexuality and “difference.” *It Gets Better* is a compilation of more than 100 messages to teens that are caught in this seemingly hopeless situation. The messages, two to four pages in length, are from a wide variety of people, from President Barack Obama to someone who describes herself as “a happy sixteen-year-old girl with a great group of friends” (p. 142). Chaz Bono, the child of Cher and Sonny Bono, tells of life as a transgendered person. Nancy Pelosi, Speaker of the House of Representatives at the time, promised a fight in congress for equality. “It Gets Better Broadway” includes the stories of more than twenty Broadway actors’ and crew members’ experiences as LGBT teenagers.

Each message is from someone who has either gone through teenage years grappling with coming out or from an ally of those teens. According to one contributor, “I was called a “sissy” and I was bullied a lot. I remember getting kicked on the playground...so hard that blood would run down my leg...I remember coming home after school and taking my socks off and throwing them away because I didn’t want my mother to see the blood. I didn’t want her to know” (p. 301). Each message also carries a message of hope. In President Obama’s message, he says “You are not alone. You didn’t do anything wrong. You didn’t do anything to deserve being bullied. And there’s a whole world waiting for you, filled with possibilities” (p. 10). Some, like Ellen DeGeneres, give concrete contact information for teens in crisis and tell them “Things will get easier, people’s minds will change, and you should be alive to see it” (p. 39).

Almost all of the contributors told their teenage readers that life after high school will be better for them. Almost all related that leaving high school, their home town, or church led to more acceptance and fulfillment. One said, “Once you’re out of high school you can find an environment that will support you. You can find an environment where you can be happy, where you’ll find people that will be there for you and accept you and love you the way you are.” And further, “Imagine you are a rubber band and right now you are pulled taut. You have all this potential energy building up and you are going to go so far once your potential is unleashed on the world... You can make it through this, and once you’re let go you’re going to fly so far” (p. 28).

A number of contributors talked about attempts at suicide. One said, “I’m very happy today that that attempt was unsuccessful. But, at the time, it was all that I could contemplate, I thought I needed to end things right then.” He goes on to refer readers to the Trevor Project, a suicide-prevention hotline for LGBT and questioning youth. Another says, “So don’t f*** us over by offing yourself. Bring it. Bring your whole bada** queer self. We need you to live. To protect us. To stand up with us. To inspire us” (p. 231).

Many shared experiences related to religion and feelings of shame and lack of acceptance in the churches of their youth. One contributor, a bishop in the Episcopal Church, said “I am living proof that it gets better...I became the first openly gay and partnered man ever to be elected to the office of bishop in the worldwide Anglican Communion...God loves you the way you are...God doesn’t want you to be cured or healed, because there’s nothing to be healed from” (p. 30).

The authors include recommendations for high school curricula related to LGBT and bullying issues, as well as information on the Trevor Project, GLSEN (Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network), and the ACLU LGBT Project.

Because of its format, *It Gets Better* would be an excellent resource for a number of different audiences. The topics of bullying, coming out, and tolerance of differences lend themselves to rich discussions, whether in the classroom, residence hall, or other student programming. Each message is short and packed with images which will generate a great deal of discussion. The language is authentic and sometimes raw. It is age-appropriate for first-year students. Rather than as a selection for a new student reading program, I can see it being very effective in a first-year seminar or interpersonal communication course or as part of student programming related to a diversity theme. I believe it would be a very effective book club selection for a number of campus organizations. It could be very useful as part of civility weeks or similar events. It could also be used effectively in English classes. Student Affairs professionals, including counseling, health, Greek life, and leadership program staff could make excellent use of the book both one-on-one and in student programming. I would also recommend it in new Student Affairs master's level courses.

The book *It Gets Better* is only a part of the YouTube *It Gets Better* project. The project continues to grow and touch the lives of countless young people each day. I highly recommend the book and the project.