

LBGT psychologists: Why gunman being gay makes sense

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When Lake Worth therapist Terri Finnigan heard reports that Orlando shooter Omar Mateen was probably gay, everything about the horrific attack that claimed the lives of 49 people at the Pulse nightclub snapped into focus.

By opening fire in the crowded gay nightclub — culminating in the largest mass shooting in U.S. history — Mateen was destroying what he hated most about himself.

“I think the worst kind of homophobia is internalized, self-loathing homophobia because it informs everything you do,” said Finnigan, a lesbian who specializes in treating the LGBT community. “I have seen personally and professionally how internalized homophobia can create rage.”

Mark Rutherford, a West Palm Beach therapist who is gay and also devotes a significant part of his practice to treating those struggling with their sexual orientation, agreed.

Since Mateen was killed in a shoot-out with police during his bloody rampage, no one will ever know whether he struggled with a sexual identity that is anathema to the tenets of radical Islam, which the 29-year-old St. Lucie man claimed to embrace. Mateen’s father has repeatedly asserted that his son was not gay.

But, Rutherford said, “I really believe that was the case.”

He cited reports that Mateen frequented Pulse, a widely popular Orlando gay bar that attracts people from South Florida and the Treasure Coast, and that he had — and used — gay apps on his cell phone. His ex-wife’s claims that he was abusive and controlling is “classic” behavior of a gay man who is struggling to deal with his sexuality, Rutherford said.

“The wife becomes the living, breathing example of everything they want to be but can’t,” Rutherford said of closeted gay men he has counseled who became abusive in heterosexual relationships.

Add to the mix a religion that, in its extreme, advocates pushing homosexuals off roofs and stoning them to death, and you have an extremely toxic and dangerous cocktail, he said.

Allan Hendricks, a Palm Beach County volunteer organizer with Equality Florida, a gay rights organization, said he understands the notion of self-loathing homosexuals. “It must be a powerful poison not to have your mind, body and soul in sync,” he said.

But, he said, typically such self-hatred turns inward. Studies have shown that gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people are more likely to suffer depression, attempt suicide and engage in other self-destructive behavior than those who aren’t demonized for their sexual

orientation.

Hendricks said he grew up in a Southern Baptist church, where homosexuality was regularly blasted as repulsive and sinful. And, he said, he's not unique.

"I know thousands upon thousands who made it to the other side to become upstanding members of society," he said.

Psychologists agree. Certainly, they said, there is no archetype for a self-loathing gay man who turns into a mass murderer.

But, West Palm Beach therapist Paul Lesnik said, history is rife with examples of politicians and evangelists who railed against the gay community only to be forced to resign in disgrace after their own sexual proclivities were exposed. Former Idaho U.S. Sen. Larry Craig, who consistently voted against gay rights legislation and left office after he solicited an undercover cop in an incident that catapulted "wide-stance" into the national lexicon, comes to mind, he said.

"It's amazing when hatred is self-hatred. It really festers," said Lesnik. "People either implode or explode. Some implode by using drugs or alcohol. Others explode by committing horrible acts."

Although the LGBT community has made enormous strides in recent years, Lesnik and Finnigan both noted that anti-gay messages still permeate society. When they are delivered by leaders of a person's chosen religion, they can become even more pernicious, Finnigan said.

While mainstream Muslims have decried Mateen's actions, insisting the true Islamic faith preaches peace and understanding, there is little dispute that radical Islam interprets the Koran far differently. In final phone calls from Pulse, FBI agents said Mateen pledged his allegiance to the Islamic State and the Nasra Front, warring factions which both condemn homosexuality.

Rutherford said religion is a powerful force for those questioning or trying to hide from their sexuality. "The more radical the religion, the more extreme the behavior," he said.

As the child of parents born in Afghanistan, Mateen, if he was gay, probably never talked to his parents about it.

Progress comes slowly, he said. Struggling economically, Muslim countries haven't made the same social progress as the United States.

Finnigan said she is hopeful that the Orlando shooting and Mateen's twisted motives can start a national conversation about the messages society sends the LGBT community.

"It doesn't happen in a vacuum," she said of Mateen's actions. "It happens because of all the messages we get from the outside world. The cultural messages everywhere we look is that being gay is not normal."

“Hopefully,” she continued, “this can be a wake-up call so we can have a different message about what it means to be gay.”