

Sexual Orientation

What is sexual orientation?

Sexual orientation is the sum of one's attractions to women and/or men. There is increasing evidence that sexual orientation has at least some biological basis, and most people report that their sexual orientation is not something they have chosen. Many people do this during their college years when they are exposed to new people and new experiences. Of course, some people explore their sexual orientation at a younger or older age.

Who is lesbian, gay or bisexual?

People who are mostly attracted to same sex partners are gay (a term usually used for men) or lesbian (a term used for women). Partners who are attracted to either sex are bisexual. Some bisexual people are equally attracted to women and men, although many bisexual people report having stronger attractions toward one sex or another. Lesbian, gay and bisexual people are any age, gender, or racial/ethnic group.

What is "coming out"?

Coming out is a process of understanding, accepting, and valuing one's sexual identity/orientation. Coming out includes both exploring one's identity and sharing that identity with others. It also involves coping with societal responses and attitudes toward gay and lesbian people. The coming out process is very personal. This process happens in different ways and occurs at different ages for different people. Coming out is a continuing, sometimes lifelong, process.

This process includes:

1. Coming out to oneself
2. Coming out to other lesbians and gay men
3. Coming out to heterosexuals

In coming out to others, consider the following:

1. Think about what you want to say and choose the time and place carefully.
2. Be aware of what the other person is going through. The best time for you may not be the best time for someone else.
3. Present yourself honestly and remind the other person that you are the same individual you were yesterday.
4. Be prepared for an initially negative reaction from some people. Do not forget that it took time for you to come to terms with your sexuality, and that it is important to give others the time they need.
5. Have friends lined up to talk with you later about what happened.
6. Don't give up hope if you initially didn't get the reaction you wanted. Due to societal prejudices, some people need more time than others to come to terms with what they have heard.

- Whether to come out, and if so, when, where, how and to whom are all questions you must answer for yourself. You may feel depressed, stressed or anxious at times when debating this decision. Taking control of the coming out process is beneficial and includes being aware in advance of potential ramifications so that you can act positively rather than defensively. Be careful not to let your self-esteem depend entirely on the approval of others. Remember that you have the right to be who you are, you have the right to be out and open about all important aspects of your identity including your sexual orientation, and in no case is another person's rejection evidence of your lack of worth or value.

How does counseling help?

Some gay and lesbian individuals may avoid seeking counseling because of the myth that counselors will try to change the individual orientation of gay and lesbian people. There is no evidence that counseling can change the sexual orientation of adults. Furthermore, most counselors would view such an attempt as psychologically damaging to the gay or lesbian individual. Counseling is a process in which a nonjudgmental, caring, and trained therapist helps a person arrive at effective solutions to problems or life tasks. Most counselors support the notion that helping involves facilitating an individual's self-exploration, self-understanding, self-acceptance, and self-esteem.

Counseling offers assistance in:

1. Identifying and clarifying issues
2. Identifying, clarifying, and expressing feelings
3. Deciding what to do
4. Developing and enhancing relationship skills

Selecting a sensitive counselor:

1. Seek out a counselor that has been recommended by other gay or lesbian individuals.
2. Ask for referrals from organized gay or lesbian resource centers.
3. Call and ask specifically for a counselor who is sensitive to and has experience working with gay and lesbian clients.
4. Take a look around the waiting room as well as the counselor's office to see if there are books or other literature on display that affirm a gay or lesbian self-identity.
5. Consider directly asking a counselor about his or her feelings and knowledge about gay and lesbian lifestyles, issues, and culture during your first meeting.

Getting help:

If you are concerned about issues regarding your sexual orientation, you should be aware that there are many facilities and a variety of counselors available to help individuals deal with issues surrounding sexual orientation. If you are a University of Louisiana at Lafayette student who has concerns regarding issues surrounding your sexual orientation and would like to speak to a counselor, please contact the Counseling and Testing Center at (337) 482-6480 for more information. The center offers unlimited confidential sessions free of charge to all students and university faculty/staff members.

Resources

- Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays
1726 M Street NW Suite 400
Washington, DC 20036
Phone: 202-567-8180
Web address: www.pflag.org
- Now That You Know. Betty Fairchild and Robert Leighton. New York, NY. Harcourt Brace and Jovanovich, 1989.
- Beyond Acceptance. Carolyn Welch Griffin, Marina J. Wirth and Arthur G. Wirth. New York, NY. St. Martin's Press, 1997.
- Straight Parents/Gay Children. Robert A. Bernstein. New York, NY. Thunder's Mouth Press, 1995.