

What does it mean to be gay, lesbian, bi or transgender?

A definition for gay or lesbian identity means that you have strong physical, emotional and romantic feelings for people of the same sex; while being bisexual means you are attracted to both men and women.

Transgender is a term that describes a broad range of people who experience and/or express their gender somewhat differently from what most people expect. It is an overarching term that covers a wide spectrum of gender expressions and identities, including those who identify as transvestites, drag kings/queens, transsexuals and androgynes as well as anyone expressing gender characteristics that don't correspond with characteristics traditionally ascribed to the person's sex or presumed sex. Many intersexed people also consider themselves part of the transgender community.

It should be noted that sexual orientation (being gay, lesbian or bisexual) and gender identity (whether you feel you are male, female or some combination of both) are two distinct though often related concepts. For example, transgender people may be gay, lesbian, bisexual or heterosexual.

How do you know?

There is no foolproof way to determine your sexual orientation or gender identity. Some people say that from the time they were very young they knew they were different while others don't realize their identities until later in life. Feelings of a sexual nature can be confusing at any age, but more so if they are directed at members of your own sex.

Moreover, sexual behavior does not necessarily determine sexual orientation - especially during adolescence, when experimentation is common. For example, some adolescents may identify themselves as gay or bisexual without having had any sexual experience with someone of the same sex. Other people have had such experiences, but do not identify as gay, lesbian or bisexual.

If you think you might be gay, lesbian or bisexual, ask yourself:

- Am I attracted to males, females or both?
- Have I ever had a crush or been in love with someone of the same or opposite sex?
- Are my feelings for others of the same or opposite sex clear?

If you cannot answer these questions now, give yourself time. You and only you should decide how to identify yourself.

Coming to the realization that you are transgender may also be confusing. There are many definitions of transgender — the broadest of which is one who bends, challenges or stretches traditional gender roles. Some transgender people define themselves as female-to-male or male-to-female transsexual and take hormones prescribed by a doctor; some undergo sex-reassignment surgery. Some are cross-dressers who identify as their gender at birth but sometimes dress in clothing of the opposite gender. Others are transvestites

who cross-dress for sexual gratification or to express their transgender nature. And some people simply identify as transgender because they don't feel comfortable with exclusively male or female gender identities. Remember that any number of these descriptions may apply to you, and what you call yourself is still **your** decision.

The facts about sexual and gender identity

No one knows how many people are gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender. The best estimates we currently have indicate that about 10% of the population is exclusively lesbian or gay. However, even the most reputable estimates are colored by the fact that many people are afraid or unwilling to be identified as LGBT, even in anonymous surveys. So the true number is probably higher.

Your sexuality or gender identity is not a choice. It chooses you.

Some people say that sexuality or gender identity is a choice to discourage you from gay or lesbian relationships or from being comfortable with expressing your gender in the way that feels right to you. But think about it for a minute: Did you choose to have feelings of same-sex attraction? Did you choose your sex at birth? Sexuality and gender identity are not choices any more than being left-handed or having brown eyes or being heterosexual are choices. They are a part of who you are. The choice is in deciding how to live your life.

It's OK to be yourself

In the 1970s, the American Psychological Association and the American Psychiatric Association revised their positions on homosexuality. Both determined that homosexuality is not a mental disorder. In 1994, the American Medical Association released a statement saying, "Most of the emotional disturbance experienced by gay men and lesbians around their sexual identity is not based on physiological causes but rather is due more to a sense of alienation in an unaccepting environment."

Nonetheless, some people might try to tell you that you are sick and that you need professional help to "change." No scientifically valid evidence exists that shows that people can change their sexual orientation, although some people do repress it. The most reputable medical and psychotherapeutic groups say you should not try to change your sexual orientation.

Most important, remember that the problems people have dealing with their sexuality come from society and its treatment of LGBT people — not from being gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender. It's OK to seek help in dealing with the confusing feelings you may have about your sexual orientation or your gender identity. Understanding and being honest with yourself as well as coming out are critical milestones in life. As with any other significant step in your life, you might seek professional help through the process. Just remember: The anxiety you are feeling is primarily the result of family or social prejudice against LGBT people.

Being LGBT is natural

You've probably heard some people say that men are "meant" to be with women, and

women are "meant" to be with men — or that you should be a "real man" or be more "feminine." They may say that unless you are straight, you are going against nature and morality. But if being gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender is unnatural, why would it occur, generation after generation, despite some cultures' strong prohibitions? The fact is same-sex love and gender variance has occurred throughout history, in every nation and culture. They are natural variations among humans, and may have occurred somewhere in your own family's history. When people say being LGBT is unnatural, they mean it is against their preconceived idea of, or conditioned assumptions about, what is natural.

Being LGBT is not a "lifestyle;" it's a life

It's sometimes said that LGBT people live a gay "lifestyle," a word chosen to trivialize us and to imply that all of us subscribe to the same values, characteristics and dreams. The fact is that the LGBT community is as diverse as the population at large. Some of us have one lifelong relationship; some have many relationships. We come from many different races and cultures. Some of us are liberal; some are conservative. Some are affluent; some are poor.

LGBT people constitute families

Some people talk as if there are two options in life: You can marry someone of the opposite sex and become a family or you can be gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender and be excluded from the definition of family. This is patently untrue.

Further, it is a position perpetuated by religious and/or political extremists who have a stake in portraying LGBT people as outside the mainstream. The fact is that LGBT people make up families just as other people do.

And if you dream about having children, you certainly can do so if you're gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender. Many LGBT people have children through adoption, alternative insemination, surrogacy arrangements or previous relationships. In addition, scientific research to date has shown that children of gay and lesbian parents are as mentally healthy as children raised by heterosexual parents. Research collected on transgender parents shows that there is no evidence that a parent's gender identity affects the gender identity of their children, according to the *International Journal of Transgenderism* (October 1998). Most important, parenting experts agree: Children need love and support. There's no reason that LGBT parents cannot give their children the same support and love that heterosexual parents can.

Unfortunately, LGBT families often are not protected under law like married couples. Thus, there are special considerations for you to make when you decide to have a child or when you and your partner commit to one another. If you are coming out as transgender or transsexual and you already have children, there are additional considerations. If you want to learn more about LGBT families and get documents to protect your family, visit www.hrc.org/familynet.

Some of the most talented people are or were LGBT

If anyone ever suggests that your life won't add up to anything if you're LGBT, remind

them that Plato was a lover of men. So were Michelangelo and Leonardo da Vinci. Bayard Rustin, a leader of the black civil rights movement, was gay. So were Oscar Wilde, Gertrude Stein, Marcel Proust and James Baldwin. Shakespeare wrote about a man's love for a man. Poet Emily Dickinson wrote about her love for a woman. More recently, musicians k.d. lang and Melissa Etheridge, and actresses Ellen DeGeneres and Amanda Bearnse have come out as lesbians. Actors Wilson Cruz, Mitchell Anderson and T.R. Knight, record producer David Geffen, Olympic diver Greg Louganis, Olympic swimmer Mark Tewksbury, Olympic skater Rudy Galindo, and U.S. Rep. Barney Frank have come out as gay.

Credits

From Human Rights Campaign (www.hrc.org) and Human Rights Campaign Resource Guide to Coming Out;
and from the UCLA LGBT Campus Resource Center (www.lgbt.ucla.edu/)