

Questions for Friends & Family

What do I do if someone comes out to me? How can I support my LGBT loved one? Learning that a loved one is gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgendered can be a difficult discovery. It can send you on an emotional roller coaster ride. You may feel like you have lost a loved one. Remember that this person is the same one that you loved before they came out to you - they have just shared another part of themselves with you. Feelings of grief, guilt and denial are natural given some of our society's attitudes towards homosexuality and gender variance. However, you owe it to your loved one -and yourself- to move towards acceptance and understanding. Whatever your reaction, reassure your loved one that they still have your love. PFLAG offers [local support](#) and [education](#) to help with that process.

Do's and don'ts for families and friends

Do's

- Do listen to what your loved one's life is like, and what kind of experiences he or she has had in the world.
- Do take the time to seek information about the lives of LGBT people from parents of LGBT people, friends of your loved one, literature, and, most of all, directly from your loved one.
- Do get professional help for anyone in the family, including yourself, who becomes severely depressed over your loved one's sexuality or gender identity.
- Do accept that you are responsible for your negative reactions.
- Do help your child (or loved one) set individual goals, even though these may differ drastically from your own.
- Do try to develop trust and openness by allowing your loved one to choose his or her own life.
- Do be proud of your loved one's capacity for having loving relationships.
- Do look for the injured feelings underneath the anger and respond to them.
- Do defend him or her against discrimination.
- Do respect your loved one's right to find out how to choose the right person to love and how to make relationships last.
- Do say, "I love you."

Don'ts

- Don't blame your own feelings on your loved one.
- Don't rush the process of trying to understand your loved one's sexuality or gender identity.
- Don't assume that your loved one should see a professional counselor.
- Don't criticize your loved one for being different.
- Don't expect your child (or loved one) to make up for your own failures in life.
- Don't try to force your loved one to conform to your ideas of proper sexual behavior.
- Don't blame yourself because your loved one is gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgendered.
- Don't demand that your child (or loved one) live up to what your idea of what a man or woman should be.
- Don't discriminate against your loved one.
- Don't try to break up loving relationships.
- Don't insist that your morality is the only right one.

What is homosexuality?

"Homosexuality" indicates affectional and/or sexual orientation to persons of the same sex.

"Bisexuality" refers to people whose affectional and/or sexual orientation can be to either gender. The term homosexual has medical roots from the turn of the century and most people now prefer the terms "gay" and "lesbian" instead. These expressions of sexuality are no longer considered forms of illness by the medical or psychological communities. Homosexuality is far more than sexual behavior. It is the complete package of feelings and relationships that make up a natural and satisfying identity.

What is sexual orientation?

A person's sexual orientation is defined by their enduring emotional, romantic, sexual or affectional attraction to other people. Heterosexual (or straight) refers to people whose sexual and romantic feelings are primarily for people of the opposite sex. Homosexual (or gay and lesbian) refers to people whose sexual and romantic feelings are primarily for those of the same sex. The term lesbian refers to women who are homosexual. Bisexual (or bi) refers to people whose sexual and romantic feelings are for people of both sexes. Other terms that people use to describe their sexual orientation are "queer" and "questioning."

What is gender identity and expression?

A person's gender identity is their internal sense of being male or female. Gender expression is how someone presents their gender to the world. We all have a gender identity, and we all have ways of expressing it. Our society has a narrow view of what it means to be a woman or a man, and we learn that from an early age. Those who are visibly gender-variant face increased risk of harassment in school, unemployment, homelessness, hate violence, lack of access to health care and loss of custody of their children. But many create supportive communities where they can be who they are. We envision a society that embraces everyone, including those of diverse gender identities.

What does Transgender mean?

A transgendered person is someone whose gender identity or expression differs from conventional expectations for their physical sex. The term transgender is used to describe several distinct but related groups of people who use a variety of other terms to self-identify.

Transgendered people can include transsexuals (not all transsexual people need or want sex reassignment surgery), masculine women, feminine men, drag queens/kings, cross-dressers, gender queers, two-spirit, butches, transmen, transwomen, etc. Like other people, transgender people can be straight, gay, lesbian or bisexual.

What causes homosexuality?

Perhaps a better question is "What determines sexual orientation?" (i.e. heterosexuality, bisexuality, homosexuality). The factors that determine sexual orientation are complex. There is a growing understanding that human beings have a basic sexuality that can be expressed in a variety of relationships: homosexual, bisexual, and heterosexual. The distinctions between these categories are fluid and may overlap. Although the causes are not known, some researchers believe that one's basic sexual orientation is predisposed at birth; while these affectional inclinations may not be recognized or acknowledged for many years, once established, they tend not to change.

How are sexual orientation and gender identity determined?

No one knows exactly how sexual orientation and gender identity are determined. However, experts agree that it is a complicated matter of genetics, biology, psychological and social factors. For most people, sexual orientation and gender identity are shaped at an early age. While research has not determined a cause, homosexuality and gender variance are not the result of any one factor like parenting or past experiences. It is never anyone's "fault" if they or their loved one grows up to be gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender. If you are asking yourself why you or your loved one is LGBT, consider asking yourself another question: Why ask why? Does your response to a LGBT person depend on knowing why they are LGBT? Regardless of cause, LGBT people deserve equal rights and to be treated fairly.

Is there something wrong with being gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender?

No. There have been people in all cultures and times throughout human history who have identified themselves as gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender (LGBT). Homosexuality is not an illness or a disorder, a fact that is agreed upon by both the American Psychological Association and the American Psychiatric Association. Homosexuality was removed from the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM) of the American Psychiatric Association in 1974. Being transgender or gender variant is not a disorder either, although Gender Identity Dysphoria (GID) is still listed in the DSM of the American Psychiatric Association. Being LGBT is as much a human variation as being left-handed - a person's sexual orientation and gender identity are just another piece of who they are. There is nothing wrong with being LGBT - in fact, there's a lot to celebrate.

What is wrong are discriminatory laws, policies and attitudes that persist in our schools, workplaces, places of worship and larger communities.

Is being LGBT normal?

Yes. Each culture defines what is "natural" or "normal" to fit its own context. Definitions differ. Historians have determined that homosexuality has existed since the beginning of humanity. Anthropologists report that LGBT people have been part of every culture. LGBT people are represented in every socioeconomic class, educational level, and race. Homosexual behavior is often criticized because it doesn't result in procreation. In fact, most heterosexual encounters don't result in births either, and relationships of all sexual orientations may have children. A homosexual identity involves both an emotional commitment to people of the same gender and membership in a community.

When do LGBT people first know?

There is no set age at which a person becomes aware that she or he is lesbian or gay. Some gay, lesbian and bisexual people become aware of their orientation during adolescence or earlier. People can realize their sexual orientation at any point during their lives. Because of strong societal pressures to be heterosexual, some people don't identify as gay, lesbian or bisexual until later in life, perhaps after they have been heterosexually married for several years.

How do people know they are LGBT?

Some people say that they have "felt different" or knew they were attracted to people of the same sex from the time they were very young. Some transgender people talk about feeling from an early age that their gender identity did not match parental and social expectations. Others do not

figure out their sexual orientation or gender identity until they are adolescents or adults. Often it can take a while for people to put a label to their feelings, or people's feelings may change over time. Understanding our sexuality and gender can be a life-long process, and people shouldn't worry about labeling themselves right away. However, with positive images of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered people more readily available, it is becoming easier for people to identify their feelings and come out at earlier ages. People don't have to be sexually active to know their sexual orientation - feelings and emotions are as much a part of one's identity. The short answer is that you'll know when you know.

How many LGBT people are there?

While this number is difficult to measure, the Kinsey Institute suggested that approximately 10% of the population is lesbian or gay. This would equal approximately 28 million per the U.S. 2000 census. Gay men, lesbians, and bisexual people are found in many walks of life, among all racial groups, and at all socioeconomic levels. Gay men's and lesbian's personalities vary as widely as do those of heterosexuals.

Can LGBT people change their sexual orientation or gender identity?

There are religious and secular organizations which sponsor campaigns and studies touting that LGBT people can change their sexual orientation or gender identity. Their assertions assume that there is something wrong with being LGBT - the largest problem is, in fact, society's intolerance of difference. It is our anti-LGBT attitudes, laws and policies that need to change, not our LGBT loved ones.

Many of the studies and campaigns are based on ideological bias rather than solid science. Claims of conversion from gay to straight tend to be poorly documented, full of flawed research with a lack of follow-up. No studies show proven long-term changes in gay or transgender people, and many reported changes are based solely on behavior and not a person's actual self-identity. The American Psychological Association has stated that scientific evidence does not show that conversion therapy works and that it can do more harm than good.

Can you tell if people are LGBT by their appearance?

No. Lesbian, gay, and bi people are as varied in their dress, mannerisms, and lifestyles as are heterosexuals. Despite this diversity, many stereotypes persist about the effeminate man or masculine woman. Although some gay people reflect these characteristics (see "Why Are Lesbians and Gay Men so Blatant"), the overwhelming majority of lesbians and gay men do not conform to these stereotypes, and their sexual orientation is invisible to the general public.

Do lesbians or gay men hate the opposite sex?

No. Lesbians are lesbians because they form loving relationships with women, and gay men are gay because they form loving relationships with men. Neither form relationships because they hate the opposite sex.

Do lesbians and gay men want to be the opposite sex?

No. Lesbians and gay men do not want to be the opposite sex. Within the gay community, there are many people who have challenged and discarded stereotypical gender roles but does not mean they are trying to be the other sex. Being gay, lesbian or bisexual involves celebration and

affirmation of one's sex, not a rejection of it. Some people confuse sexual orientation with transsexuality.

Why are LGBT people so blatant?

LGBT people are often accused of being blatant (wearing buttons, marching in gay rights marches, talking and writing about homosexuality, holding hands in public, etc.) Our culture teaches that the only acceptable way to be gay is to be silent or invisible ("in the closet"). Any openness about LGBT identity is labeled "blatant" or as "flaunting it". "Blatant" heterosexuality is rarely questioned (media, entertainment, and other institutional practices such as asking for spousal benefits and hospital visiting rights). In society, the assumption of heterosexuality is so strong that unless one proclaims that they are same gender loving, heterosexuality is assumed. To avoid being perceived as heterosexual, "coming out" is often a necessity.

Is homosexuality healthy?

Beginning with UCLA's Dr. Evelyn Hooker's work, studies have shown that people's sexual orientation has no bearing on their mental health and emotional stability. In 1973, the American Psychiatric Association removed homosexuality from the official listings of psychiatric disorders. In 1975, the American Psychological Association adopted a similar resolution.

What about HIV/AIDS?

Since the onset of the HIV/AIDS epidemic, many people have viewed HIV/AIDS as a gay issue. The LGBT community mobilized early in the epidemic to formulate a response that included educating communities, creating visibility to reduce stigma, developing prevention strategies and advocating for appropriate care and treatment options for People Living with AIDS (PWAs). Yet the epidemic has continued to progress and take its toll on many communities globally. Still, despite overwhelming statistics documenting the spread of HIV/AIDS in other communities, many people still choose to view HIV/AIDS as a gay issue.

The truth is that being LGBT does not give you AIDS. Certain sexual practices, certain drug use behaviors and other factors can put you at risk for catching HIV, the virus that causes AIDS, as well as other sexually transmitted diseases (STDs). Everyone needs to get the facts about HIV/AIDS.

HIV is spread by sexual contact with an infected person, by sharing needles and/or syringes (primarily for drug injection) with someone who is infected, or, less commonly (and now very rarely in countries where blood is screened for HIV antibodies), through transfusions of infected blood or blood clotting factors. Babies born to HIV-infected women may become infected during birth or through breast-feeding after birth. While research has revealed a great deal of valuable information, a lot of false or misleading information, often fueled by homophobia, continues to be shared widely through the Internet or popular press, so be sure to consider the source when educating yourself about [HIV/AIDS](#).

If your loved one is presently HIV-positive or has AIDS, they now need your support more than ever. You should know that you are not alone. There are numerous local and national organizations that can help you with medical, psychological and physical care. A web hub for

Chicago HIV/AIDS resources can be found at:
www.globalchicago.org/global_aids/aids_links.asp

Is homosexuality immoral?

In recent years many theologians and clergy have begun to look at sexual relationships in terms of the love, mutual support, commitment, and the responsibility of the partners, rather than focusing on the gender of the individuals involved. Historian John Boswell suggested traditions of same-sex unions within the Christian church are centuries old. While some religious traditions continue to teach that homosexuality is immoral, there are also many congregations that are open, accepting, and supportive of the gay, lesbian, transgender, and bisexual community. Spiritual leaders in these congregations encourage all their members to deepen and express their faith by adhering to core beliefs rather than ancient laws and customs.

How can I reconcile my or my loved one's sexual orientation with my faith?

This is a difficult question for many people. Learning that a loved one is gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgendered can be a challenge if you feel it is at odds with your faith tradition. However, being LGBT does not impact a person's ability to be moral and spiritual any more than being heterosexual does. Many LGBT people are religious and active in their own faith communities. It is up to you to explore, question and make choices in order to reconcile religion with homosexuality and gender variance. For some this means working for change within their faith community, and for others it means leaving it. There are many resources to help you in this journey. See the Chicago Coalition of Welcoming Churches for more information at www.chicagowelcomingchurches.org/index.shtml

Do LGBT people have long-lasting relationships?

Yes. Longstanding relationships are common. However, because of the social stigma expressed against LGBT people, these partnerships are nearly always invisible. Same sex marriages are currently not recognized and many benefits for legal spouses are denied to domestic partners. In addition, recognition of partnerships goes unrecognized in the media (e.g. marriage and obituary announcements) and in the workplace (lack of desktop photos and social invitations).

Can LGBT people have families?

Yes. Gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered people can have families. Same-sex couples do form committed and loving relationships. In the United States many same-sex couples choose to celebrate their love with commitment ceremonies or civil unions, although these couples are not offered the [rights and benefits of marriage](#). [Massachusetts](#) has recognized same-sex marriage since 2004. [Connecticut](#), [Vermont](#), [New Jersey](#), [California](#), and [New Hampshire](#) have created legal unions that, while not called marriages, are explicitly defined as offering all the rights and responsibilities of marriage under state law to same-sex couples. [Maine](#), [Hawaii](#), the [District of Columbia](#), and [Washington](#) have created legal unions for same-sex couples that offer varying subsets of the rights and responsibilities of marriage under the laws of those jurisdictions. More and more LGBT couples are also raising children together, although state laws on adoption and foster parenting vary. And of course, many LGBT people have the support of the loving families they were born into, or the families that they have created with their other friends and loved ones.

Won't gay parents make their kids gay?

Research has shown that children of lesbian or gay parents are no more likely to become gay or lesbian than children of heterosexual parents. Gays, lesbians and bisexuals are just as likely to be good parents as heterosexuals. Of course, children growing up in non-traditional families may face a certain amount of social prejudice. Fewer and fewer children are growing up in two-parent, heterosexual, nuclear families and lesbian and gay families are one of the many forms of diverse families that exist.

What is heterosexism?

Heterosexism is the assumption that every one is heterosexual. It is a form of oppression (like other forms of oppression: racism, sexism, classism, ageism, etc.) that targets gays, lesbians, and bisexuals. Heterosexism confers rights and privileges to heterosexuals that are denied to gay, lesbian, and bisexual people. This is revealed through personal behaviors (telling "faggot" jokes, graffiti, verbal and physical harassment), and discriminatory policies such as denial of health, retirement and housing benefits. In addition, few positive role models exist in mainstream media.

What is homophobia?

Homophobia is the irrational fear, disgust, or hatred of gays, lesbians or bisexuals or of homosexual feelings in oneself. Homophobia refers to the discomfort one feels with any behavior, belief or attitude of self or others that does not conform to traditional sex role stereotypes. Homophobia results in fears of befriending, or associating with gays, lesbians, or bisexuals; fear of being perceived as gay or lesbian; fear of stepping out of accepted gender role behavior.

What does the term "queer" mean?

The word "queer" is used by some LGBT people but is not embraced by all gay people. It is true that many have chosen to reclaim this once derogatory label for all LGBT people, while some use the word to designate only those in the community who are political activists. However, there are other gay people who dislike the word "queer" and resent its use. Additionally, terms such as "dyke" and "fag" can be used in insulting derogatory ways, but have been reclaimed by many as terms of pride. This is just one more example of the diversity of opinions within the community.

Why should people be informed about LGBT issues?

Becoming informed about LGBT issues helps reduce heterosexism and homophobia. This makes it easier for one to live a more open and productive life in their work and home communities. The culture as a whole is therefore enriched. For LGBT youth, who are more likely to experience depression and rejection by friends and/or family, acceptance and understanding could be a matter of life or death. For more information please visit <http://www.glsen.org/cgi-bin/iowa/all/home/index.html>

Should LGBT people be banned from certain jobs?

No. Sexual orientation does not affect one's job qualifications or performance. Unfortunately, some people believe that gay men and lesbians should not be allowed to hold certain positions such as teacher, supervisor or health provider. They feel that gay men and lesbians are sexually irresponsible and less trustworthy than heterosexuals, particularly with children. The stereotype

of child molester or hypersexual gay person is common but entirely false. In fact, it is well documented that the overwhelmingly majority of those who molest children are heterosexual men.

Why do LGBT people need gay rights laws? Isn't that asking for special privileges?

Currently there are no federal protections for lesbians or gay men who are subject to discrimination. Gay rights laws do not give LGBT people special privileges. They are civil rights laws consistent with the beliefs that all people are entitled to such necessities as employment, housing and business services without fear of discrimination. Unfortunately, in many states, LGBT people can be (and are) fired from their jobs, denied housing, credit, or insurance solely because of their sexual orientation. These beliefs, like those used to discriminate against people on the basis of race, ethnicity, religion, age, physical ability, or gender, are based on prejudice and ignorance rather than accurate information.

Why should I support LGBT rights?

LGBT rights are not special rights. You should support LGBT rights because:

- our LGBT children, friends and family members deserve the same rights as our straight ones
- discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity is still legal
- an LGBT person can be fired from their job simply because of who they love or how they express their gender
- same sex couples can only be married in Massachusetts
- LGBT youth face constant harassment and abuse in schools across the country
- your loved ones need you to take a stand for fairness. By being open about yourself and your family you are already helping to dispel misinformation and fear.

Credits

From Parents Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG) (www.pflag.org)

From the UCLA LGBT Campus Resource Center (www.lgbt.ucla.edu/)