

SEXUAL ORIENTATION

What is Sexual Orientation?

Sexual orientation refers to the gender (or genders) of the people we have feelings of attraction and affection toward both emotionally and physically. This is an important part of our self-identity; how we see ourselves and how others see us. It is one of the most difficult parts of ourselves to talk about and understand. In addition, understanding our sexual orientation can happen at any time during our lives.

Some terms that describe sexual orientation:

Heterosexual is to have feelings of affection and attraction, both emotionally and physically to people of the opposite gender (sex). This is also called "being straight".

Homosexual is to have feelings of affection and attraction, both emotionally and physically to people of the same gender (sex). Generally, homosexual males are referred to as "gay" and women referred to as "lesbians". Gay is also a term to describe anyone who is not heterosexual.

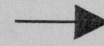
Bisexual is to be a woman or a man and to have feelings of affection and attraction, both emotionally and physically to both men and women.

How do I know what my sexual orientation is?

You are the only one who will know what your sexual orientation is. No one can talk you into being something that you are not. Coming to understand your sexual orientation can happen at any time during your life. There is no time limit on making a decision about your sexual orientation. Feelings of affection and attraction can be very confusing and this is quite normal.

Expectations about who we should be come from family, friends, school, television, videos, movies, magazines, church and society as a whole. We live in a world where it is assumed that everyone is heterosexual.

You may want to share your feelings with a trusted family member, friend, counsellor, nurse, teacher or someone at a gay or youth community centre. Reading books with a gay theme will show you that you are not alone in your questions and provide you with important information. You will know if what you are doing feels right. Learn to trust your own feelings.



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What is homophobia?

Homophobia is a term used to describe extreme, negative attitudes and feelings regarding homosexuality. Homophobia can range from feelings of discomfort to outright hatred and violence. We take part in homophobia when we laugh at jokes about lesbians and gay men, reject family members or friends who come out as lesbian, gay or bisexual, or deny basic rights such as employment to lesbian or gay persons. In Canada, homophobia is against the law. Being gay is not wrong, in fact, it is your right to be who and what you are. What is wrong is when you have to be something that you are not.

What does it mean to be "out"?

When gay, lesbian or bisexual people talk about "coming out of the closet" or "coming out", they mean telling others openly about their sexual orientation. This can be very difficult. Admitting your sexual orientation to yourself may be difficult enough. Even when people do "come out", they may only come out to a few very close friends or family members.

If you think you are gay, lesbian or bisexual and are thinking about coming out it may be helpful to talk to someone on a gay, youth "help" phone-line. They can help answer questions without anyone knowing who you are.

Who should I tell?

The person you choose to tell should be someone that you have shared secrets with before and feel you can trust. It is important to pick a trustworthy friend or family member who understands the importance of your privacy and values your safety and well-being. It should also be someone who does not talk badly about or makes cruel remarks about lesbians, gays and bisexuals. Some people feel threatened by talking about sexual identity.

You will have no way of guessing the exact response your friend or family member will have. If telling someone does not work out the way you wanted or planned, don't despair.

The following resources may be helpful:

- Parents Family Friends of Lesbians and Gays
A national voice that speaks for amore accepting Canadian society by providing support, education and resources on issues of sexual orientation and gender identity
pflaglondon@hotmail.com
- Open Closet – a drop in support group for lesbian and gay teens 14-18 years
Meets Fridays from 7:00 – 9:30 at 388 Dundas St
opencloset@hotmail.com
- Health Canada HIV/AIDS website: www.hc-sc.gc.ca/hiv_aids
- AIDS Committee of London (519) 434-1601

For more information contact the Sexual Health Promotion Team at 663-5317.

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