

BE YOURSELF

Questions & Answers for Gay, Lesbian and Bisexual Youth

INTRODUCTION

The world can be a tough place for a teenager. You're in one of the most confusing times of your life.

For one thing, your body is changing more than it will at any other time. And your hormones, hard at work changing your body, can be playing around with your moods. You may feel great one day and miserable the next, for no clear reason.

The rules are changing. You're expected to act more and more like an adult. You may have new adult responsibilities like volunteer work or a part-time job, but you might not be given adult rights, like coming home at whatever time you want.

Your relationship with your parents is changing. You're becoming more independent, and they're having to accept that you're not their little girl or boy any more. That's not easy for either of you.

And all of a sudden, something you didn't think about a few years ago - sex - might feel like the most important thing in the world.

If you're a gay, lesbian, or bisexual teenager - or if you think you might be gay or wonder if you are - it's even more confusing, because probably no one ever prepared you for that.

When you were younger, your parents and relatives may have teased you about liking girls if you're a boy, or boys if you're a girl. Maybe they talked about "when you grow up and start dating" or "when you fall in love and get married". But they probably never talked about when you grow up and fall in love with another guy, or about marrying a woman just like you.

TV, movies and magazines all mostly show men and women. The music you hear is about falling in love with the opposite sex. If you're a boy, your friends are probably talking about girls, and if you're a girl, they're talking about boys.

All of that makes things hard if you're gay, because you don't have much that relates to you.

This booklet was written to try help you — to answer some of your questions, to suggest books you can read and people to whom you can talk — and to help you understand three things:

One: Being gay, lesbian or bisexual is a normal and healthy way to be. It's one part of who you are — like being tall or short, black or white or Asian or Latino.

Two: It takes time to know who you are. It's OK to be confused, it's okay to be unsure whether you're gay or straight, and it's okay to take your time finding out. There's no need to rush.

Three: You're not alone. Right now, there are tens of thousands of other teenagers, all thinking they're gay or wondering if they're gay, all wondering if they're the only one, all trying to find someone to talk to about it. Hundreds of thousands more, however have already traveled that road.

One of them or another helpful person will be on the other end of the line if you call any of the numbers at the back of this book. They're people with whom you can talk openly, compare notes, and ask advice.

The questions other teens have had about being gay shape this booklet. We hope it will help you find your own answers.

I THINK I MIGHT BE GAY, BUT WHAT IF I DON'T KNOW FOR SURE?

THE SHORT ANSWER: You'll know when you know. It could take a while, and there's no need to rush.

Some gay people say that, from the time they were very young - even just five or six — they “felt different”. They didn't share the grade-school crushes about which friends talked, or they had crushes on friends of their own sex — and no one seemed to be talking about that.

Often, they say, it took a while to put a name to their feelings — to begin to think of themselves as gay, or lesbian, or bisexual. But when they started thinking in those words, it made sense — it fit with the feelings they'd had growing up.

Many other people, though, don't begin to figure out their sexual orientation until they're teenagers or even adults — and it can be confusing.

At some point, almost everybody gets a “crush” on someone of the same sex, like a great teacher or a friend's older sister or brother. Almost everybody's “best friend” is of the same sex. But none of that means you're gay.

One or two sexual experiences with someone of the same sex may not mean you're gay, either — just as one or two sexual experiences with someone of the opposite sex may not mean you're straight. Many gay people have some sexual experiences with the opposite gender, and many straight people have some sexual experiences with their own gender.

It's important to know, too, that you can be a virgin or not be sexually active and still know that you're gay. Your feelings and your emotional and physical attractions will help tell you who you are.

Our sexuality develops over time. Don't worry if you aren't sure. The teen years are a time of figuring out what works for you, and crushes and experimentation are often part of that. Over time, you'll find that you're drawn mostly to men or women — or both — and then you'll know. You don't have to label yourself today.

If you think you're gay, lesbian or bisexual, don't be afraid of it, and don't hide your feelings from yourself. All that does is keep you from figuring out your sexual identity — from figuring yourself out.

I DON'T SEE ANYTHING THAT SAYS OTHER PEOPLE ARE GAY. AM I THE ONLY ONE?

THE SHORT ANSWER : No

Dr. Alfred Kinsey, the world's best-known sex researcher, concluded from his research that almost nobody is purely straight or gay. He found that most people have some attraction to the same sex during their lives, and that many people have some sexual experiences with the same sex, or with both sexes.

Think of it as a range, or "sexual continuum". At one end of the range are many people who are attracted to the same sex. At another end of the range are many people who are attracted only to the opposite sex. And in between are people who are attracted to both sexes. So wherever you are on that continuum, you've got plenty of company. Some estimates say that one in every ten people is gay.

There are gay people all around you - you just can't tell who they are. They're white, black, Asian, Hispanic, and native American. They're Jewish, Catholic, Protestant, and Buddhist. They're old and young, rich and poor. They're doctors and nurses, construction workers, teachers and students. Secretaries, ministers and rabbis, store clerks, mechanics, business people, police officers, politicians, and athletes.

And when they were teenagers, most of them probably felt the same way you do. If you get to feeling you're all by yourself, just remember: singer k.d. Lang probably felt that way too. And Elton John. And tennis star Martina Navratilova. And Congressman Gerry Studds. And thousands and thousands of other people.

IS IT NORMAL TO BE GAY?

THE SHORT ANSWER: Yes. Being gay is as natural, normal, and healthy as being straight.

No one knows exactly how human sexual orientation - gay or straight - is determined. Most experts think it's a matter of genetics, biology and environment - that a person's sexual orientation could be set before birth or as early as two or three years old.

Dr. Richard Pillard, a psychiatrist at Boston University School of Medicine, points out that homosexuality exists “in virtually every animal species that has been exhaustively studied”. Homosexuality is as much a part of nature as heterosexuality.

Not only is it as natural, it’s as healthy to be gay as to be straight - no matter what some people might tell you. The American Psychiatric Association declared in 1973 that homosexuality is not a mental disorder or disease, and the American Psychological Association says that it would be unethical to try to change a gay person’s sexual orientation.

Many other people besides scientist, psychologists and psychiatrists now understand that, too. Ann Landers, the advice columnist, recently wrote: “It never ceases to amaze me in this day and age, so many people fail to understand that homosexuality is not a lifestyle that is chosen. That ‘choice’ was made at birth”.

So if you’re wondering why you’re gay, the answer is that some people are gay and some people are straight just as some people have blue eyes and some people have brown eyes. It’s not something that anyone can chose to be or not to be. It’s just one more piece of who you are.

I THOUGHT GAY PEOPLE ACT CERTAIN WAYS. IF I DON’T FIT A STEREOTYPE, AM I STILL GAY?

THE SHORT ANSWER: Ignore the stereotypes. Some people fit them, some don’t. Be yourself.

Gay people, like straights, act all kinds of ways. Stereotypes arise out of ignorance and prejudice. Sometimes a stereotype about a group doesn’t fit anyone in that group. Sometimes it fits a few people, sometimes more. But a stereotype never fits everyone in any group.

For example, you might hear that gay men are “effeminate”. Well, for just a few recent examples that show how ridiculous and untrue that statement is - what about Dave Kopay, who played NFL football for 10 years, or Olympic gold medalist diver Greg Louganis? Both men are gay - along with many other famous athletes. What about the openly gay police officers in major cities? What about Joe Steffan, one of the most decorated Navy cadets of the last few years/ And what about Bob Jackson-Paris, former Mr. Universe?

You’ll also probably hear about transvestites and transsexuals. Transvestites are people who like to dress like members of the opposite sex. Most transvestites are actually straight. Transsexuals are people who want to change their gender through surgery, and then live their lives just like any other man or woman. Being gay doesn’t make you a transvestite or a transsexual, and being a transvestite or transsexual doesn’t make you gay. (For more information on transgender people, ask the organizations in the resources directory of this booklet for referrals).

Some people react to stereotypes by trying to act just the opposite. Some straight males who aren't sure of their sexuality may act super macho, as do some gay men who are afraid of being identified as gay, or "outed". Some lesbian women act very feminine for the same reason.

Remember - you don't need to prove anything to anybody. Just be yourself.

DO I NEED TO WORRY ABOUT HIV and AIDS?

THE SHORT ANSWER: Everybody has to be informed about HIV and AIDS.

Being young doesn't protect you from getting AIDS. A lot of people in their 20s and 30s who are dying from AIDS today became infected when they were teenagers. It's not who you are - gay or straight, male or female, black or white - but what you do that puts you at risk for HIV infection.

AIDS is a disease caused by a virus. That virus, named HIV, destroys the body's immune system, making a person susceptible to fatal illnesses or infections. There is no known cure, and there is no vaccine that prevents AID.

There are three main ways you can become infected with HIV: (1) by having unprotected sex with an infected person; (2) by sharing drug needles or syringes with an infected person; or (3) an infected woman can pass the virus to her baby during pregnancy or birth.

Also, you can't judge by appearances whether someone has the HIV virus or not. The virus can be inactive as long as ten years. Someone who appears healthy could still be affected.

You can protect yourself, though. Do not share needles or syringes, If you are shooting or using street drugs, seek professional help from a local clinic. The one sure way to avoid HIV infection through sex is not to have sex, And gay or straight, if you are sexually active, learn about "safer sex" to protect yourself. Some safe sex practices include using latex condoms or dental dams to stop the HIV virus.

It is not within the scope of this booklet, however, to give a complete overview of HIV/AIDS and safer sex. For more information, contact one of the organizations or AIDS hotlines in the resources list.

WILL I BE ACCEPTED?

THE SHORT ANSWER: Some people will accept you and some won't.

Prejudice and discrimination are everywhere in America, and around the world. There's prejudice against blacks , against women, against older people against any group you can name. Women weren't allowed to vote in the United States

until early in the 1900s

"I was afraid because our society thought they weren't smart enough. While the

until I found
the phone
number for a
gay helpline.
I was happy
to find other
people in
town who
were gay”

Suffragette movement - and later the women's - helped to change that kind of thinking, women still encountered discrimination on the job, on the streets, in politics, and in the home. It takes time to overcome Prejudice and change attitudes.

If you are gay, you're going to run into prejudice. Our society has a "heterosexual assumption". We're taught - by our families, our schools, our religions and the media - to assume that everyone is straight, and we're often influenced to discriminate against those who aren't. That "assumption" has begun to change only recently.

The prejudice you run into could be fairly mild, like people assuming you're straight when you're not, and embarrassing you with their mistake. But it could be much worse. Gays are at risk to be beaten up, kicked out of their homes, and fired from their jobs - just for being gay. People often fear what they don't understand, and hate what they fear. That's the basis of prejudice and, when it's aimed at gays, it's called "homophobia".

Homophobia is being challenged, however, as more and more people are learning that being gay is as normal and healthy as being straight. Attitudes are starting to change partly because gay people - like women, Jews and blacks did before them - are beginning to stand up and say, "I'm gay and I'm proud". Attitudes are changing also because other people are standing up with gays to say, "These gay people are my friends, or my children, or my brothers - and I'm proud of them".

I FEEL SO ALONE, WHO CAN I TALK TO?

THE SHORT ANSWER: If you feel alone, you are alone - and you don't need to be. There are people out there who can help.

Unless their parents have been very open with them about sex, most teenagers can feel guilty and ashamed of any sexual feelings and experiences, straight or gay. Some adults have a hard time with their sexual thoughts, so it's not surprising that teenagers do, too.

On top of that, it's not easy to discover that you are gay. The prejudice that exists in our society can make you want to hide the way you feel, even from yourself. And that can make you feel isolated and all alone.

The best thing you can do is find someone to talk to that you can trust.

Maybe that's someone you already know - a friend, parent, brother or sister... or a friend's "My school is liberal and it was still tough coming out. Come out

you confided in the past, whom you know you can trust again

But, right now, until you're comfortable and happy with yourself, avoid talking with anyone who you think might judge you or anyone who might be anti-gay. You could

where you feel safe” possibly check out people’s reactions by bringing up the subject of homosexuality in general. Ask questions like: “I saw gay and whose parents threw her out of the house. Why would they do that?”

When you ask questions like this, however, you have to realize that people’s responses aren’t personal comments about you. They don’t know the real intent of your questions. They might have negative comments about gay people in this situation, but respond very differently about you being gay.

If you don’t know anyone with whom you’re comfortable talking, who will be supportive and understanding, start by calling one of the helpline numbers or organizations listed in the back of this brochure. You can talk to a teenager or an adult. You don’t have to give your name, and they won’t try to talk you into or out of anything.

If you don’t feel ready to talk with someone on the phone, you can get a gay pen pal or participate in one of the computer bulletin boards. And if you *do* want to talk with someone face-to-face, people on the national hotlines and computer bulletin boards can help you find a local group or person to call. Remember to use good judgement when making any contacts.

Whatever you choose, talking really helps. And you’ll learn you’re really not alone.

SHOULD I “COME OUT?”

THE SHORT ANSWER: Only if you want to, and only when you’re ready. Don’t come out just because someone else thinks you should.

Hiding the fact that you’re gay is called “being in the closet.” Being open about it is called “coming out.” You can come out to one person, to friends and family only, or to everyone you know. It’s up to you.

There’s no reason you have to come out if you aren’t ready. Sometimes there are very good reasons not to come out. There are real risks in coming out. There are people who won’t accept you if you’re gay, people who will do and say terrible things. They could be our parents or your friends or your classmates or our teachers, people you love or depend on for financial help, companionship, encouragement, or other support.

There are also very good reasons, however, to let some people know that you’re gay. Hiding your sexual orientation keeps the important people in your life from knowing about a big part of you. Hiding who you are keeps your relationships from being real. At some point, many gays find that the loneliness and isolation of keeping a secret is worse than any fear of coming out.

Whatever your reasons for thinking you should or shouldn’t come out, it’s your decision and no one else’s. It’s also one you should take at your own speed.

Before you come out to others, you have to come out to yourself. That means not only knowing you’re gay, but being comfortable with being gay, and being sure of who you are as a person.

Keep in mind that knowing you're gay is just being aware of one more piece of who you are. You're the same person you were before; you just know more about yourself. A lot of gay teens have learned to say to themselves, "I'm gay and that's OK."

Before you come out, you might want to be educated about being gay for your own information and because many people will have wrong ideas. You'll feel proud to know the facts if someone asks you a question or if you want to correct someone's lies about people. Read one or more of the books for teenagers listed in the back of this booklet and talk to other gay people on the phone or in person. By learning about their experiences and talking about yourself, you'll know more about who you are and what to expect when you come out. Tell your new gay friends that you're getting ready to come out so they can support you.

That kind of support system is really important when you're coming out. You'll want people around who care about you and will be there for you, whether it's just to talk or to give you a hug when you need one or to give you a place to stay, if you need that. If you don't feel that you already have people like that, call the nearest PFLAG chapter or one of the other groups listed at the back of this booklet.

WHO SHOULD I TELL?

THE SHORT ANSWER: To start only those people who you want to know.

Coming out isn't something that you do once and then it's over. You might come out now to your family and later to friends, or the other way around. You could come out only to one parent, or to a brother or sister, and later to the rest of the family.

The people you tell first should be the ones you trust the most. You need to be able to trust them not to hurt you, to accept you for who you are, and to respect your privacy and not tell anyone you don't want told.

Think about what you could lose by telling a particular person. If it's a parent, might they kick you out of the house? Cut you off from your friends? If it's a friend, are they likely to withdraw from you? Would they tell other kids at school? What would happen if they did?

Think also about what you could lose by *not* telling a particular person. Is your relationship with your parents or your friend strained because you're keeping a secret from them? Would you be closer with them, and be able to get more support from them, if they understood why you were acting withdrawn?

Think about what kinds of things you've been able to share with them in the past and how they reacted. If there's someone to whom you want to come out, and you aren't sure how they'll react, try to feel them out first. Get them talking about a book or a movie or a television show about gays. Use the questions on page 8, under "I feel so alone."

Keep in mind that someone's reaction to a gay person in a movie might not be the same if that gay person is *their* daughter or *their* brother or *their* or *their friend*. And it can work both ways- people might seem either more or less prejudiced in a hypothetical or movie-type situation than they would when responding to someone close to them.

For example, because homophobia is so common in our society- and still so widely accepted- a friend or a parent might, without thinking, joke about a gay character in a movie- or might do so because they think you expect that- but show far more thoughtfulness and desire to understand when responding to your coming out. On the other hand, parents or friends who seem accepting of gay characters in the media might be far less accepting of homosexuality in someone close to them.

To get a sense of how someone will react to *your* being gay, try to keep your questions specific, personal, and thought-provoking. Say you have a friend who has an older brother off at college, or in the military. You could say something like "I've been reading about gay groups on college campuses." or "I've been reading about gays in the military. Would you be upset if *your* brother came home and told you he was gay?" Your friend might surprise you and answer, "My brother is gay."

HOW DO I TELL MY PARENTS?

THE SHORT ANSWER: When you're ready, and with care.

Many gay teens say that their relationship with their parents was much closer after they came out because it was more honest. They felt relief like they weren't keeping a secret any more.

PFLAG was founded by parents who wanted to support their gay sons and lesbian daughters- parents who wanted to work with their children for equal rights, and who wanted to welcome their sons' and daughters' lovers into their families.

But it doesn't always work that way. Some teens who come out to their parents are forced to leave home. Some parents become abusive. Some family relationships never recover.

Before you come out to your parents, there are some things for you to consider.

Think about your parents' general reaction to gays. Find out as much as you can, by observing your parents or asking indirect questions. Do they have a gay friend? Do they read books or go to movies that include gay relationships? Is their religion accepting of gays? Have you heard them say that there's nothing wrong with being gay?

Think about your relationship with your parents. Have they shown that they love you even when they're upset with you? Have they stuck by you even when you've done something they didn't like?

Be prepared. If you had to leave home, do you have a place to stay? If your parents cut off financial support, do you have someone else to whom you can turn?

If your answer to all of these questions is “no,” *don't* come out to your parents until you have a safe place to go to and way to support yourself. You'll probably be better off waiting until you're on your own. You might decide never to tell them, because they wouldn't understand.

If your answer to all of these questions is “yes,” then it's probably safe to tell them.

You're the only one who can answer those questions, and weigh the balance of “yeses” and “nos,” trust your gut. It's almost always frightening coming out to your parents, but if you're terrified about it, you should pay attention to that. Not all parents will be accepting.

If you decide you can and want to tell your parents, think about how you can make it easiest on them-and yourself. Try to think about how they're going to feel, and the questions they may have, so that you're ready for them. Call a local PFLAG chapter and speak to a parent who can talk with you about how your own parent might react.

It will also be best if you can pick a time when your parents are relaxed and not pressured by work or family worries. Otherwise, they may feel they don't have the time to deal with it, and shut you out.

Be prepared for your parents to need some time to accept your being gay-just as you probably needed some time yourself.

Remember that your parents are from an older generation-one that was more homophobic than yours. Even if they're accepting of gays in general, your parents may be shocked at learning that *you* are gay. They may not want to believe it at first, or they may want to try to bring in a psychiatrist to “cure” you.

Before the psychological and psychiatric associations concluded that homosexuality is perfectly normal, there were a lot of theories about how people became gay because of how their parents acted. Your parents may worry about what your being gay says about *them* and about whether they failed you in some way-and that worry can come out as anger and defensiveness.

Your parents could also feel that you've rejected them or their way of life by being gay, or that you've somehow ruined their dreams for you. There's often some of this feeling in *all* relationships between teens and their parents, as the teen becomes more independent and parents have to let go of the image *they* have of what their son or daughter will be. Parents of gay teens may feel this sense of loss and rejection even more strongly.

Even if they don't have those reactions, your parents are probably going to feel worried about you about whether this will put you in danger, about whether your life will be happy, about whether you'll have a family of your own. That can make them want to ignore or deny what you've told them.

They may worry about how they're going to tell *their* parents and friends . They'll be starting a coming out process of their own.

The best thing you can do is be ready with answers-or suggest people with whom they can talk. The more homework you've done, and the more self-assured you seem, the more you'll convince your parents that you're ready to take responsibility for yourself. Then they won't worry so much about you.

PFLAG can help a lot with that-with suggested books, videos, and information for you and your parents, and by providing contacts with other families who have gay and lesbian children, or counselors who can help your parents work through their feelings.

And remember-you don't have to come out to both parents at once. Many teens have talked first to the parent they thought would be more accepting or with whom it was easiest to talk. Recognize, though, that confiding in only one parent may cause hurt and tension between your parents-hurt because the parent who is not told may feel slighted when he or she finds out, and tension because the parent you *do* talk to will now have the burden of explaining your silence-or of keeping a secret until you are ready to talk to the other parent. Think it through if you plan to tell just one parent.

Most importantly, make sure that you have other people with whom to talk, because, even when coming out to your parents is relatively easy, it's hard . The more support you have, the better.

WILL I LOSE MY STRAIGHT FRIENDS? AND WHERE DO I FIND GAY FRIENDS?

THE SHORT ANSWER: To the first question-probably not. And to the second-everywhere.

Many teens say they have more straight friends now that they're "out," and that they're a lot happier and more confident since coming out. It's easier to be close to people when you're not hiding anything and when you're comfortable with yourself.

Some teens, however, have had horrible experiences coming out at school. Particularly in small towns or rural areas, and where there are a lot people belonging fundamentalist religions, discrimination against gays is still strong. And kids can be very cruel, especially when they're unsure of themselves and are looking for ways to build themselves up. They can harass you and make your life miserable. Gay teens have a very high drop-out rate because of the way they're treated. Right now, only one state-Massachusetts-has a law that prohibits discrimination in the public schools based on sexual orientation.

If you want come out to friends, be careful to trust only friends who will respect your privacy and confidentiality. Friends who tend to gossip can cause problems, even if they don't mean to hurt you.

Some friends will be supportive right away. (Both guys and girls say it's generally easier to come out to girls.) One or two friends might have already guessed that you're gay. You may find that you already have gay friends, and didn't know it .

Some friends may need time to adjust to the idea of your being gay. Some may wonder if your coming out to them is a way of coming on to them, and that might make them feel uncomfortable. Some may wonder, since you're a close friend and you're gay, whether they're gay too. Just as you did with your parents, try to think about how each friend is likely to feel, and how you can let them see that you haven't changed. Just as with your parents, offering them some of the books listed in the back of this booklet can help.

Talking to gay friends about their coming-out experiences can also help. Finding new friends who are gay is really important-friends who know exactly what you're going through because they've "been there," or are in the process of coming out themselves.

Gay youth organizations are a good place to start, because there you won't have to try to figure out whether another teen is gay or not. Most major cities have gay youth organizations where you'll be able to meet people easily. You'll find new friends with whom you can share experiences and support and learn more about yourself.

If you're in a small town or in the country, it may be harder to find groups like these. In that case, you can meet people through the pen pal programs and computer bulletin boards listed in the back of this booklet. The organizations in the resources directory can also help you find more specific groups, such as organizations of gay and lesbian African Americans, Arabs, Asians, or Latinos, or support groups for gays and lesbians with disabilities.

And Remember - even if it seems to you that you must be the only gay person at your school, you aren't. With as much as 10% of the population being gay, there are other gay students at your school whom you might already know-but not know that they're gay- or whom you might not yet have met. Gay people joke sometimes about having "gaydar," a type of "radar" for telling who is and isn't gay. Figuring out who is gay, if they're not completely "out," is like figuring out if someone's interested in you. Sometimes you can tell, sometimes you can't. You'll get better at it with experience.

Can I Have A Family of my own?

THE SHORT ANSWER: Yes.

Many gay people hold wedding ceremonies to celebrate their commitment to each other and to share their relationship with family and friends. While only a few religions, and no states, perform or witness these ceremonies, attitudes are beginning to change. More and more companies, such as IBM and American Express, now treat gay partners like any other married couples, and provide health care coverage for their gay employees' partners. President Clinton's Administration has used the words "you and your significant other" instead of "you and your spouse" in recognition of gay partners.

Many gay couples are also raising children together. Some lesbians have used artificial insemination in order to conceive a child. Other gays and lesbians, who came out after they'd been involved in heterosexual relationships, are raising the children from those relationships with

their gay partners. As society's attitudes continue to change, adoption of children by gay couples will also become more common. Six states permit adoption by same-sex couples.

And many gays see their friends and the local gay community as their family. In most cities, there is a large and close-knit gay community that offers the same type of love and support we look for from our families.

Be Yourself

Obviously, this booklet cannot ask or answer every question. But we hope it gives you a place to start. You don't have to be alone when exploring your sexual identity. The resources beginning on page 18 will give you a place to continue — to find information, to find answers, and to find friends.

You'll learn that the best advice is to be yourself. If you are gay, lesbian or bisexual, you'll soon find that you have the power to shape and define your coming out — to make it unique for yourself. While coming out will present you with questions and situations you never faced before, you'll also find great joy in the journey of discovery.