

Common Questions about Homosexuality

Introduction

"Homosexuality" is a clinical term. Most male homosexuals generally prefer to be called "gay men" and most homosexual women generally prefer to be called "lesbians." Much of the prejudice against lesbians and gay men is based on stereotypes and lack of information. Due to our socialization and fear of the unknown, people who are different from the majority can be perceived as threatening. The purpose of this brochure is to present factual answers to questions most often asked about homosexuality and to identify resources for those seeking additional information.

What is homosexuality?

Homosexuality is the capacity to feel love and sexual satisfaction with someone of the same gender. Heterosexuality is the capacity to feel love and sexual satisfaction with someone of the other gender and bisexuality is the capacity to feel such a connection with someone of either gender.

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. To date, no research has established the causes of either heterosexuality or homosexuality. There is growing understanding that human beings have basic sexuality which can be expressed in a variety of relationships - homosexual, bisexual and heterosexual. Although the causes are not known, many researchers believe that one's basic sexual orientation is predisposed at birth or established by a very early age. While these primary affectional inclinations may not be recognized or acknowledged for many years, once established, they tend not to change substantially.

How many gay men and lesbians are there?

The Kinsey Institute research, conducted in the 1940's and 1950's, suggests that approximately 10% of the population is lesbian or gay. Though some researchers believe this estimate to be too high or too low, it is safe to assume that lesbians and gay men constitute a significant minority group. Consequently, even though we may not be aware of their sexual orientation, most of us know someone who is lesbian or gay. The vast majority of lesbians and gay men remain "in the closet"; that is, they reveal their sexual orientation to only a few trusted friends.

When do gay men and lesbians 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 sexual orientation during adolescence. Because of the strong societal pressures to be heterosexual, however, some people do not realize that a heterosexual lifestyle does not meet their needs until later in life, perhaps even after they have been married for years.

Can you tell if people are lesbian or gay by their appearance?

No. Lesbians and gay men are as varied in their dress, mannerisms, and styles as are heterosexuals. Despite this diversity, many stereotypes persist about the effeminate man or the masculine woman. Although some gay people do adopt these styles, the overwhelming majority of lesbians and gay men do not conform to these stereotypes, and their sexual orientation is

invisible to the general public. We only "see" those who conform to our stereotypes. People who dress in the clothing of the opposite sex are called transvestites. The vast majority of transvestites are heterosexual, not lesbians or gay men.

Do lesbians and gay men hate the opposite sex?

No. Lesbians are lesbians because they form loving relationships with women, and gay men are gay men because they form loving relationships with men, and neither form these relationships because they hate the other gender. Many lesbians have close male friends and many gay men have close women friends.

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 who have challenged and discarded stereotypical sex roles but this does not mean that they are want to be the other gender. Gayness involves celebration and affirmation of one's gender, not a rejection of it.

Some people confuse gayness with transsexuality. A transsexual is a person who has an operation to become the other gender. These people - very few of whom are lesbian or gay - feel deeply that they have been born into the wrong body and should be the other gender.

Is homosexuality healthy?

Studies have shown that people's sexual orientation has no bearing on their mental and emotional stability. In one landmark research project, mental health professionals were unable to distinguish between homosexuals and heterosexuals in terms of functionality, stability, and creativity. In 1973, the American Psychiatric Association removed homosexuality from the official listing of psychiatric disorders. In 1975, the American Psychological Association adopted a similar resolution.

Is homosexuality immoral?

Many religious traditions have taught and some continue to teach that homosexuality is immoral. These condemnations are based primarily on a few isolated passages from the Bible. Historically, Biblical passages taken out of context have been used to justify such things as slavery, the inferior status of women, and the persecution of religious minorities. 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 the gender of the individuals involved. Currently, there are many gay and lesbian religious groups and religious congregations that are open, accepting, and supportive of the gay community.

Is being gay "natural"?

Each culture defines what is "natural" or "normal" to fit its own context and these definitions differ. Historians tell us that homosexuality has existed since the earliest of human societies. Anthropologists report that lesbians and gay men have been part of every culture, that in many cultures bisexuality is the norm, and that in some societies homosexuality is very common. Lesbians and gay men are represented in every socioeconomic class, educational level, and race. It is often said that homosexual behavior is not natural because the purpose of sex should be reproduction. In addition to the fact that most heterosexual encounters are not intended to produce children, homosexual relationships, like heterosexual relationships, consist of much

more than just sexual encounters. A homosexual identity involves both an emotional commitment to people of the same gender and membership in a community.

Do gay men and lesbians have long-lasting relationships?

Yes, long-standing relationships are common. The difficulty, when compared to heterosexual relationships, however, is that society and the family (for the most part) disapprove of homosexuality. This disapproval puts an extra strain on gay and lesbian relationships which also have to cope with the common stresses that affect all couples.

Should gay men and lesbians be barred from certain jobs?

Sexual orientation does not affect one's job qualifications. Unfortunately, some people believe that gay men and lesbians should not be allowed to hold certain positions such as teacher, foster parent, soldier, counselor, religious leader, or police officer. They fear that gay men and lesbians are sexually irresponsible and less trustworthy than heterosexuals. (In fact it is well documented that the overwhelming majority of those who molest children are heterosexual men.) These beliefs, like those used to discriminate against people on the basis of race, ethnicity, religion, physical ability or gender, are based on prejudice and ignorance rather than on accurate information.

Why are lesbians and gay men so blatant?

Gay men and lesbians 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 semi-acceptable way to be gay or lesbian is to be silent or invisible ("in the closet"). Any openness about lesbian or gay identity is labeled "blatant" or derided as "flaunting it." "Blatant" heterosexuality is rarely questioned (ads, TV, song lyrics, institutional practices such as benefits for spouses and hospital visitation rights). Heterosexuals are rarely criticized for talking about their love lives, wearing buttons that proclaim, "I'm his/hers," or being affectionate in public.

In our society, the assumption of heterosexuality is so strong that unless one proclaims one's lesbianism, gayness, or bisexuality, one is automatically assumed to be heterosexual. In order not to be misperceived, "coming out" in some fashion is often a necessity.

Won't gay parents make their kids gay?

Research has shown that children of lesbian or gay parents are no more or less likely to become gay or lesbian. Most gays and lesbians had heterosexual parents. Lesbians and gay men are as likely to be good parents as heterosexual parents. Of course children growing up in non-traditional families may face a certain amount of societal prejudice, but such challenges can be empowering for children if they have love and support. Fewer and fewer children are growing up in two-parent, heterosexual, nuclear families. Lesbian and gay families are one of the many diverse family types that exist.

Why do gay people need Gay Rights laws - isn't that asking for special privileges?

Gay rights laws do not give lesbians and gay men special privileges. On the contrary, gay civil rights laws are consistent with the traditional American belief that all people are entitled to such basic necessities as employment or housing without fear of discrimination. Currently there is no federal protection for lesbians and gay men who are discriminated against. Unfortunately in all states except CT, MA, HI, NJ, WI, and VT lesbians, gay men, and bisexual people can be (and

are) fired from their jobs, and denied housing, credit, or insurance solely because of their sexual orientation. Gay civil rights laws would extend the same protection to gays, lesbians, and bisexuals that other groups in the U.S. already have.

Do homosexuals spread AIDS?

No. AIDS (Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome) is spread by the HIV virus. So far in the United States there are certain groups who have been disproportionately affected by AIDS, but anyone who practices unsafe sex or shares needles while using drugs, is putting themselves at risk. There is another disease that has been equally virulent, the disease of AFRAIDS. Those affected by AFRAIDS are misinformed and blame AIDS on different groups - gay men, bisexual men, people of color, IV drug users, people from Haiti etc. The gay community has been an inspiration to many because of the courageous and powerful way it has responded to this human tragedy.

What is homophobia?

Homophobia is the irrational fear, disgust, or hatred of gays, lesbians, or bisexuals or of the homosexual feelings in oneself. Homophobia refers to the discomfort one feels with any behavior, belief, or attitude of self or others which does not conform to traditional sex role stereotypes.

Homophobia results in: fear of associating with gays, lesbians, or bisexuals; fear of being perceived as gay, lesbian, or bisexual; fear of stepping out of accepted sex-role behavior; and fear of knowing and befriending over 10% of humanity.

What is heterosexism?

Heterosexism is a form of oppression (like other forms of oppression - racism sexism, anti-Semitism, classism, ableism, etc.) that targets gays, lesbians, and bisexuals. Heterosexism includes the belief in the superiority of heterosexuality and inferiority of homosexuality as well as assigning rights and privileges to heterosexuals that are denied to gay, lesbian, and bisexual people. Heterosexism is revealed through: personal behaviors (telling "queer jokes," anti-gay graffiti, verbal and physical harassment); institutional policies (discrimination in jobs, housing, immigration, child custody, etc. with no civil rights protection); and cultural norms (no positive images of gays, lesbians, or bisexuals in the media, in courses, or as role models).

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