Commonly Asked Questions about People who are Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual

- **What causes homosexuality? Are people born gay or lesbian, or is it a choice?**

  No one knows for sure what determines anyone’s sexual orientation. There is no known cause for homosexuality, just as there is no known cause for heterosexuality. Although all people have a sexual orientation, only in the case of people who are lesbian, gay, or bisexual is it considered to be the result of a personal choice. The most recent research indicates that sexual orientation is in place very early in life. Research also indicates that there may be a genetic component or biological factors involved in homosexuality -- just as is assumed to be the case with heterosexuality. There are many myths and stereotypes which underlie questions about the “cause” of homosexuality:

  a) Family-related Myths: That all lesbians and gay men come from families that are unstable, probably broken, and that did not offer a proper loving and moral environment; or that all lesbians and gay men had overly submissive or dominant mothers or fathers.

  b) Sexuality-related Myths: That all lesbians and gay men experienced some type of sexual trauma or rape at a young age; That all lesbians and gay men are scared of sexual relations with the opposite sex; That all lesbians and gay men were seduced into “the gay lifestyle.”

  c) Morality-related Myths: That all lesbians and gay men are simply hedonistic people (interested only in pleasure) who have chosen to live an immoral lifestyle, or that they have been influenced by the devil to live an immoral lifestyle.

  All of these myths are theories which have been proposed to “prove” the cause of homosexuality. No studies have shown conclusive evidence to support any of them. Many people believe that the cause of homosexuality should then determine how we treat people who are homosexual. For example, it is common to think that if people “choose” to be gay or lesbian, they are less deserving of respect or equal treatment. Most persons who are lesbian, gay, or bisexual view their sexuality as a natural part of themselves, just as heterosexuals do. They view it not as choosing to be lesbian, gay, or bisexual, but as choosing to acknowledge and accept their own feelings and behaviors. To them it is not a preference, which implies a choice, but an orientation.

- **How many people are lesbian, gay, or bisexual?**

  There is no conclusive evidence about the rate of occurrence of homosexuality or bisexuality. The most commonly used figure is 10 percent, which comes from research conducted by Alfred Kinsey, who found that an average of 10 percent of the adult population in the United States were predominantly homosexual as adults. More recent research has suggested that approximately 4 to 7 percent of the population is lesbian or gay. It is difficult to accurately estimate how many people are lesbian, gay, or bisexual for several reasons:

  a) Most people are not completely hetersexual or completely homosexual. The Kinsey studies of human sexuality found that most people have an integration of homosexual and heterosexual feelings, although one orientation may dominate.

  b) Often the conflicting figures result from studies which don’t make a clear distinction between sexual behavior and sexual identity. Sexual behavior refers to actual activity, while sexual identity refers to a person’s self-identification of their sexual orientation. Sexual identity and sexual behavior are not always congruent. For example, many people who identify themselves as homosexual have engaged in sexual activity with opposite-sex partners. Many people who identify themselves as heterosexual have engaged in sexual activity with same-sex partners. Some people who identify as homosexual do so before they have ever been sexually active at all.
c) People who are bisexual are often not accounted for in this research because they are labeled as homosexual if they are in a relationship with a same-sex partner or heterosexual if they are in a relationship with an opposite-sex partner.

In reality, sexual orientation exists on a continuum ranging from completely homosexual to completely heterosexual. Most individuals fall somewhere in between.

- **At what age do most people become lesbian, gay, or bisexual?**

Research indicates that sexual orientation is determined very early in life, possibly even before birth. What this question is really asking is, “At what age do most people recognize that they are lesbian, gay, or bisexual?” People “come out,” meaning that they self-identify as lesbian, gay, or bisexual, at all ages. Some people know about their sexual orientation at a very early age. Some may feel as young children that they are somehow “different,” but they may not have the words to describe that difference until they are older. As part of the normal developmental process, most people awaken to their sexuality in early adolescence. But because of the social stigma associated with homosexuality, young people who feel attracted to members of the same sex often deny those feelings, sometimes for years, while they try to fulfill family and societal expectations that they will be heterosexual. Many people feel so much pressure to behave heterosexually because of negativity and prejudice that they do everything to conform to those expectations, including getting married and having children. It may not be until later in life that these individuals come to terms with their sexual orientation.

- **What is the gay lifestyle?**

There is no definable “gay lifestyle,” just as there is no standard heterosexual lifestyle. There is as much diversity of lifestyle among people who are lesbian, gay, or bisexual as there is among heterosexuals. People who are lesbian, gay, or bisexual come from all cultural and religious backgrounds. Some are wealthy, while others are middle class or low income. Some are single and sexually active with more than one partner, while others are in long-term committed relationships. Some engage in unhealthy behaviors such as drinking too much, engaging in unprotected sex, or using drugs, while others do none of these things. Some are politically active, while others are not. Some do not attend any church, while others are deeply involved in their chosen community of faith. The term “the gay lifestyle,” is misleading because it implies that all persons who are lesbian, gay, or bisexual live their lives in the same manner, sharing identical values, beliefs, and behaviors. Often the values, beliefs, and behaviors which are implied are the foundation of negative stereotypes about persons who are lesbian, gay, or bisexual.

- **Are gay and lesbian people easily identified?**

To attempt to define persons who are lesbian, gay, or bisexual by physical characteristics or behaviors is as impossible as defining heterosexuals in the same manner. They are found in all walks of life, at all social and economic levels, and among all cultural groups. There is as much diversity among persons who are lesbian, gay, or bisexual as among heterosexuals. Most people who are lesbian, gay, or bisexual are indistinguishable in appearance from other people, unless they choose to make their sexual orientation visible. While some persons who are lesbian, gay, or bisexual do exhibit stereotypic “gay” behavior (such as masculine women or effeminate men), they are not representative of all lesbians, gays, and bisexuals. In fact, we all probably know a number of persons who are lesbian, gay, or bisexual, but may not be aware of it because they look and act like everyone else. In addition, many heterosexuals exhibit a variety of behaviors commonly stereotyped as “gay.”
**Is homosexuality unnatural?**

From a scientific point of view, homosexuality is natural, meaning that it occurs in nature. Research has shown that homosexual behavior exists throughout the animal world. There has been evidence of homosexuality in all human cultures throughout history. One argument often used by those who feel homosexuality is “unnatural” is that only heterosexual sexual relations can be natural since only heterosexual sexual relations can result in procreation and the reproduction of the human species. However, this argument assumes that procreation is the only purpose for human sexual activity, and ignores the fact that there are heterosexual individuals who also cannot procreate (i.e. due to infertility).

**Is homosexuality a mental illness? Can homosexuals be cured?**

Neither the American Psychological Association nor the American Psychiatric Association consider homosexuality a mental illness. There is no evidence to support that persons who are lesbian, gay, or bisexual suffer from mental illness at a rate different from heterosexuals. Common myths related to this question are that homosexuality is an arrested state of development (that lesbians and gay men never got past “that phase”) or that all lesbians and gay men are emotionally immature. Studies have found no difference between homosexuals and heterosexuals on a variety of criteria, including self-esteem, family relations, and general life satisfaction. In some cases, persons who are lesbian, gay, or bisexual experience greater need for counseling or therapy, but this is more directly related to the prejudice, social stigma, and negativity they encounter in society, rather than inherent mental illness. Since homosexuality is not an illness, there is no need to “cure” it. Most psychiatric and psychological attempts to “cure” homosexuality have failed to change the client’s sexual orientation; at most they can inhibit the client from expressing homosexual behavior.

**Is homosexuality condemned in the Bible?**

There is much disagreement about the Biblical basis for condemning homosexuality. The relatively few (eight) passages in the Bible which are said by some to refer to homosexuality are the subject of much debate and differing interpretations by religious scholars. Although the word “homosexuality” is used in these verses in some translations of the Bible, the word “homosexuality” itself and even the concept of sexual orientation did not exist when the Bible was written. Jesus himself says nothing about homosexuality anywhere in the Bible.

**If we begin to accept homosexuality as an “alternative lifestyle,” won’t that cause an increase in homosexuality?**

Social and legal equality for persons who are lesbian, gay, or bisexual would undoubtedly lead to more openness about homosexuality. This increased visibility of persons who are lesbian, gay, or bisexual might be interpreted by some people as an increase in the actual percentage of persons who are lesbian, gay, or bisexual. This question is also based on the myth that if we talk about homosexuality openly or in any way except negatively, we are “promoting homosexuality,” which will encourage more people to “choose the homosexual lifestyle.” This myth is based on the incorrect belief that people can change their sexual orientation (i.e. that people whose natural orientation is heterosexual would somehow suddenly be attracted to members of the same sex).

**Isn’t homosexuality a sign of a decline in societal morals?**

Acceptance of persons who are lesbian, gay, or bisexual in our society at this time would require a change in some of our values, however, we should not equate change with decline. The idea that homosexuality is socially destructive is based on the myth that "rampant homosexuality" has accompanied the fall of such powerful civilizations as the Roman Empire. However, some great civilizations such as the Roman Empire and the Persian Empire have declined in spite of strong anti-homosexual taboos. The association between the acceptance of homosexuality with societal decline is also based on the idea that if homosexuality were accepted, it would
increase, and the human race would die out. While this may sound ridiculous in our overpopulated world, this belief dates back to the ancient Hebrews, who could not allow for sexual activity that did not result in procreation because of the importance of increasing the tribal population.

- **Are homosexuals promiscuous?**

Persons who are lesbian, gay, or bisexual have the same range of sexual activity -- from none to a lot -- as heterosexuals do. Some persons who are lesbian, gay, or bisexual probably have many sexual partners, just as do some heterosexuals, but many others maintain long-term committed relationships, just as do many heterosexuals. Maintaining relationships can be more difficult for same-sex couples; they often receive little or no social, legal, or religious support. They cannot legally marry, they are discouraged from showing affection in public or bringing partners to social functions, and they may receive little or no support from their families. The perception of homosexuals as promiscuous is partially perpetuated by media bias; often we get more information about the sexuality of persons who are lesbian, gay, or bisexual and little information about the diversity and depth of their relationships. Further, the stories generally covered by the media are the sensational ones, such as gay men who have anonymous public sex, while the everyday lives of most people who are lesbian, gay, or bisexual are not talked about and are therefore made invisible. Sexual activity is only one part of a lesbian, gay, or bisexual person’s life, just as it is only one part of a heterosexual person’s life. The stereotype of homosexual promiscuity is also based on the myth that persons who are lesbian, gay, or bisexual are automatically attracted to all members of their own sex. They are not attracted to all members of their own sex any more than all heterosexuals are attracted to every person of the opposite sex.

- **Do homosexuals molest children?**

Persons who are lesbian, gay, or bisexual are no more likely to be child molesters than are heterosexuals. Child molestation occurs in no greater or lesser proportions in either the heterosexual or homosexual population. A study of the U.S. Department of Public Health showed that more than 90 percent of child molestation is committed by heterosexual men against females. In addition, the vast majority of molestations of boys by men are perpetrated by self-proclaimed heterosexual men. The myth that homosexuals molest children comes out of the myth that gay people “recruit” young people by taking advantage of them sexually. The myth is often perpetuated by the media due to the practice of reporting molestation, rape, or murder of male children by men as “homosexual” crimes although the molestation, rape, or murder of female children by men are not reported as “heterosexual” crimes. Such a practice confuses the issues of sexual abuse and pedophilia with sexual orientation.

- **Do lesbians want to be men? Do gay men want to be women?**

The assumption that lesbians and gay men want to be the opposite sex is based on the myth that they dress in the clothes of and behave like the opposite sex. However, sexual orientation (whom one is attracted to) is different from gender role behavior (whether one behaves in what are culturally defined masculine or feminine ways). The very nature of relationships with two same-sex partners requires breaking down stereotypical gender roles (for example, the idea of housework being “women’s work” or yard work being a man’s job). Most persons who are lesbian, gay, or bisexual are comfortable being the sex that they are. Being lesbian or gay is not the same as being transsexual, which means that the person feels they were born in the wrong sex body.

- **In gay or lesbian relationships, does one person play the man and the other play the woman?**

This question is based on the myth that lesbians and gay men are attempting to imitate heterosexual relationships and that heterosexual relationships have clearly defined, traditional male and female roles. However, gender roles -- the roles and behaviors which we associate with being male or female -- are changing for all people
throughout our society. Masculine and feminine traits are not as strictly categorized, and men and women are generally more free to adopt behaviors traditionally associated with the opposite sex. Many couples, both homosexual and heterosexual, are trying to establish relationships based on equality and shared responsibilities.

- **Do lesbians hate men? Do gay men hate women?**

These ideas are based partially on the illogical notion that lesbians and gay men hate people of the opposite sex just because they are not attracted to them. To assume that one hates half the population because one is not sexually attracted to them is based on the faulty idea that persons who are lesbian, gay, or bisexual are only interested in other people as potential sex partners. Following this logic, it would be necessary to assume that all heterosexual women hate other women and all heterosexual men hate other men. These ideas are also based on the myth that persons who are lesbian or gay “choose” to be homosexual because they have had negative or traumatic experiences with members of the opposite sex.

- **Can homosexuals have children?**

Many people who are lesbian, gay, or bisexual have been or are married. For many gay men and lesbian women, heterosexual marriage is often an attempt to lead a “normal” life and conform to societal expectations of heterosexuality. Many people who are lesbian, gay, or bisexual have children from their marriages. Additionally, many people who are lesbian, gay, or bisexual are deciding that they want to have children and are arranging to become parents through adoption or artificial insemination. However, the parental rights of persons who are lesbian, gay, or bisexual are not always secure. In some states, they are barred from adopting children or their parental rights are terminated by the courts.

- **Can homosexuals be good parents?**

There is no evidence that being heterosexual makes an individual a better parent than being homosexual. The idea that persons who are lesbian, gay, or bisexual cannot be good parents is based on the myth that children who are exposed to homosexuality will then become homosexual. However, there is no evidence that children of persons who are lesbian, gay, or bisexual will necessarily grow up to be lesbian, gay, or bisexual themselves. The sexual orientation of the parent is not the determining factor in the sexual orientation of the child, as can be seen by the fact that most persons who are lesbian, gay, or bisexual themselves have heterosexual parents.

- **Isn’t homosexuality against family values?**

The belief that homosexuality is opposed to family values is based on the narrow definition of a married heterosexual couple with children as the ideal family. In reality, only a small percentage of heterosexual families conform to this ideal. Instead, American society is composed of families with single parents, divorced parents, remarried parents and their new spouses, step-children, extended families with grandparents, adopted children, foster children, etcetera. Many people associate these changes in family structures, including gay and lesbian families, with the rise of a variety of societal problems, such as crime, drug use, and violence. The idealized view that all heterosexual families are inherently good ignores the reality that there are serious problems which exist in traditional heterosexual families as well, such as domestic violence, sexual abuse of children, adultery, and other issues. Also, research has shown that children with parents who are lesbian or gay are just as well-adjusted, and emotionally and psychologically healthy as children with heterosexual parents. Often, the distress they experience is not due to the sexual orientation of their parents, but to others’ prejudiced reactions to their family.
Why do homosexuals flaunt their sexuality?

Often people who are lesbian, gay, or bisexual are accused of “flaunting” their sexuality just for talking openly about their sexual orientation or engaging in everyday activities such as talking about their same sex partner or holding hands in public. Yet these are activities which heterosexuals engage in all the time without being accused of “flaunting” their sexuality. Actually, most heterosexuals don’t realize the degree to which they make their heterosexuality known all the time. For example, by wearing engagement and wedding rings, having pictures of their spouses and children on their desks at work, talking about attractions to members of the opposite sex (such as “hot” movie stars), talking about dating, and in many, many other ways. People who are lesbian, gay, and bisexual want the freedom to talk about their daily lives openly without fear of prejudiced and discriminatory reactions, just as heterosexuals do.