

Sexuality: am I gay, lesbian or bisexual?



FAST FACTS

- It's natural to want to embrace and explore your sexuality whatever your sexual orientation is - gay, lesbian, bisexual, straight or something else!
- If you're going to explore sex and sexuality, make sure you read about how to prevent [HIV](#), other [sexually transmitted infections \(STIs\)](#), and unplanned pregnancy.
- Remember there are lots of pleasurable ways to explore sexuality that don't involve penetrative sex.
- Some people find words like 'gay' help to define them; others would rather not be labelled. Either is fine, it's up to you.
- Talking to other people with similar experiences can really help if you're thinking about coming out. Googling for LGBT support groups in your area is often a good start.

Sexuality and sexual expression is an important part of many people's lives as they grow up and should be enjoyable and pleasurable.

Sexual feelings and sexual attraction can be exciting, but also complicated and confusing. If you're trying to work out what you're into, and whether you're attracted to men or women or both, remember that you're not the only one.

Figuring all this out is especially hard because so many people around us assume that everyone is heterosexual (straight).

What is sexuality?

'Sexuality' refers to the way in which you express yourself sexually. It includes how you feel about sex, how you feel about your gender, the people you are attracted to, the things you'd like to do, pleasure and intimacy, body image, [relationships](#), and for some people reproduction.

Human sexuality has always been fluid, so it's natural if you want to embrace and explore it!

Sexual orientation describes our feelings of attraction towards other people. Sexual orientation is different to gender identity.

Gender identity is someone's personal experience of their gender - whether they [feel they 'fit' growing up as a boy or girl](#); and whether they feel their gender is the same or different to the sex they were assigned at birth.

Am I gay, lesbian, bisexual or something else?

Your sexual orientation - the people you want to have sex with - is just one part of your sexuality, but for many it can be the most confusing.

There are lots of words that people use to talk about and describe their sexual orientation.

Men who find other men attractive may call themselves 'gay', women who find other women attractive may call themselves 'lesbian', and people who find both men and women sexually attractive may say they are 'bisexual'.

Other people who are attracted to people of any gender, sex or sexual identity may call themselves 'pansexual'. And people who don't feel sexually attracted to anyone may call themselves 'asexual'.

There are lots of other words people use, and different ones might be used in your language or in your culture.

Do I have to define my sexuality?

Some people find that a word like 'gay' suits them - they feel it describes part of who they are.

But you don't have to label yourself. Other people find that things are more complicated and that their sexuality can't be defined by one of these words. Many people's sexual feelings change as time goes on.

When I come out to people, I don't like to brand myself a certain orientation. I want my freedom to learn, to grow, and to experiment.

- Shalini

Some people describe themselves as 'questioning', meaning that they are still working it out. Sexuality is a very personal thing. As you explore and discover your own sexuality, you'll get to know what feels right for you.

What if I am confused about my sexuality?

Some people worry that they can't be sure about their sexual orientation if they've never done anything sexual with someone else.

If this is the case for you, you might be tempted to try things out with someone to 'find out' if you're attracted to people of that sex. While this could work out, if you rush into sex or a relationship that feels uncomfortable, or with a person you're not really attracted to, then you may have a bad experience that just confuses you even more. Sex is going to be more satisfying with someone you really like.

Sexuality, sexual health, pregnancy and HIV

If you decide you're ready to explore sex, make sure you understand how to prevent [HIV](#) and other [sexually transmitted infections \(STIs\)](#), and unplanned pregnancies. Condoms are the best way to prevent against both pregnancy and HIV and other STIs, so have fun practising how to use [external condoms](#) (which go on penises or sex toys, also called [male condoms](#)) or [internal condoms](#) (which go in vaginas or anuses, also called [female condoms](#)).

Remember there are lots of ways to explore sex and sexual pleasure that don't involve penetrative sex - kissing, touching, stroking, and exploring intimacy to name just a few.

Whatever sexual activity you explore with someone else - from sexting to penetrative sex - there should always be shared understanding, trust and both your [consent](#). Sex will always be more enjoyable when you and your partner both feel good in your bodies and [feel ready](#).

With the right knowledge about [oral](#), [vaginal](#), and [anal](#) sex you can stay healthy, enjoy your sex life, and make the right choices for yourself.

Whatever happens your first time, your sexual feelings will keep on changing and developing as time goes on. What you like now may be very different to what you like in a few years' time.

Should I tell people I like other guys (or girls)?

If you know for sure that you have sexual feelings for members of your own sex, you may be going through a whole range of feelings. While the idea of sex itself might interest or excite you, you may be worried or confused about it at the same time. You might also be afraid of other people's reactions.

You don't have to rush straight into making major changes - whether that's telling everyone you know, spending all your time with new friends, or getting into a new relationship. Take the time to explore, discover and enjoy your sexuality.

What is the best way of 'coming out'?

It can be a great relief to confide in people you trust and who care about you. Their love, support and understanding may be invaluable. Rather than telling everyone at once, it's better to start with one or two carefully chosen people. Then you'll have a better idea of whether you want to talk about this with other people and the best way to do it.

I told my mum which was really hard, she was confused and had a time to begin with, we didn't talk until the next day and my sisters were disgusted with her because we were such a close family, but after she had thought about it she came to terms and we had a heart to heart and now we're closer than ever.

- Toby

Many people choose to be open with everyone, or almost everyone they know, so that their sexual orientation is hardly ever a secret. Not having to hide parts of your life from other people can be liberating and reduce anxiety. Living in this way may also make it easier to meet other people who have a similar lifestyle.

On the other hand, just because you decide to 'come out' about your sexual orientation to some people you know, this doesn't mean that you have to be open with everyone in every situation. Some people prefer to be 'out' in some parts of their lives but not others.

And sadly, in some parts of the world being open about your sexual orientation may make you vulnerable or put you at risk. So always think carefully about the potential benefits and risks of talking to someone you trust.

What if I get a negative reaction to coming out?

Not everyone who knows about your sexual orientation will have a positive reaction. Some people are just uncomfortable with anything that seems a little different or that they don't understand. It may just take some time for them to get used to the idea or to understand what your life is really like.

Unfortunately some people may be hostile or unkind. If someone tries to intimidate or bully you, it's very important to get help and advice from a support organisation, friends you can trust, or someone in authority (such as a teacher, if you are at school).

Discovering your true orientation is not easy, but having the freedom to experiment is a gift. To anyone I come out to, I'm willing to give them the time to adjust. Give them the same freedom. I wouldn't trade these feelings for anything else in the world. The excitement is actually not knowing - just learning is a big thrill and through experimentation you can learn a lot about yourself.

- Shalini

Getting support

Hearing from and meeting other people who have had similar experiences can be really helpful when you're coming out. Depending on where you live there may be a support or social group nearby. If not, there may be a telephone support line you can call, or an online support group you can join.

Googling for LGBT support groups in your area is often a good start. The websites below also have helpful information on coming out.

Useful LGBT support and information websites

[Being gay is okay](#)

[It gets better](#)

[Stonewall - Coming out](#)

[RUComingOut](#)

Photo credit: ©iStock.com/DusanManic



Sources:

Weeks, J. et al (2002), 'Sexualities and Society: A Reader' Cambridge: Polity Press

Being gay is ok (2017), 'Popular topics'

Brook (2017), 'Advice on coming out'

Brook (2017), 'Sexuality'

THT (2017), 'What is sexuality'

IPPF (2016), 'Putting sexuality back into Comprehensive Sexuality Education'

Last full review: 06 September 2017

Next full review: 06 September 2020

Last updated: 9 May 2018