



## Sexual Orientation and Homosexuality

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#### What is sexual orientation?

Sexual orientation is one of the four components of sexuality and is distinguished by an emotional, romantic, sexual or affectionate attraction to individuals of a particular sex. The three other components of sexuality are **biological sex** (whether we are born as a male or female), **gender identity** (the psychological sense of being male or female) and **social gender role** (the extent to which people conform to what is regarded in our society as feminine and masculine behavior).

Three sexual orientations are commonly recognized: **heterosexual**, attraction to individuals of the other sex; **homosexual**, attraction to individuals of one's own sex (same-sex attracted); or **bisexual**, attraction to members of both sexes. Women with a homosexual orientation are usually referred to as lesbian and men with a homosexual orientation are usually referred to as gay.

Sexual orientation is different from sexual behaviour because it refers to feelings and individuals' views about what they consider themselves to be. Sexual behavior is simply how people behave in a sexual situation. Individuals may or may not express their sexual orientation in their behaviors.

#### What causes a person to have a particular sexual orientation?

How a particular sexual orientation develops in any individual is not well understood by scientists. Various theories provide different explanations for what determines a person's sexual orientation, including genetic and biological factors and life experiences during early childhood. Despite much research there is no proven explanation of how sexual orientation is determined. However, many scientists share the view that for most people sexual orientation is shaped during the first few years of life through complex interactions of genetic, biological, psychological and social factors.

Despite what some people claim, there is no evidence that society's greater acceptance of homosexuality results in more people having a homosexual sexual orientation. The greater numbers of people identifying as homosexual are a result of fewer people fighting their homosexual feelings while attempting to live heterosexual lives.

#### Is sexual orientation a choice?

**No.** For most people, sexual orientation emerges in early adolescence without any prior sexual experience. Some people report trying very hard over many years to change their sexual orientation from homosexual to heterosexual, with no success. For these reasons, psychologists do not consider sexual orientation for most people to be a conscious choice that can be voluntarily changed. People don't choose their sexual orientation; they can of course choose the kind of a life they want to live.

### Is homosexuality a mental illness or emotional problem?

**No.** Psychologists, psychiatrists and other mental health professionals agree that homosexuality is not an illness, mental disorder or emotional problem. However negative attitudes towards homosexuality can result in gay and lesbian people having negative thoughts about themselves, which can result in emotional and/or social problems.

In the past, homosexuality was thought to be a mental illness because mental health professionals and society had biased information about homosexuality. Most of that information came from studies that only involved lesbians and gay men undergoing therapy for problems. When researchers examined data about gay people who were not in therapy, the idea that homosexuality was a mental illness was found to be untrue.

In 1973, the American Psychiatric Association confirmed the importance of the new research by removing the term 'homosexuality' from the official manual that lists all mental and emotional disorders. In 1975, the American Psychological Association passed a resolution supporting this action and additional research findings have subsequently reaffirmed this decision. All mental health professionals are now urged to help dispel the stigma of mental illness that some people still associate with homosexual orientation.

### Can lesbians and gay men be good parents?

**Yes.** Studies comparing groups of children raised by homosexual and by heterosexual parents find no developmental differences between the two groups of children in their intelligence, psychological adjustment, social adjustment, popularity with friends, development of social sex role identity or development of sexual orientation. Recent UK research suggests that lesbian co-parents may even be better at sharing household and parenting responsibilities and therefore devote more time and better care to the children.

Another stereotype about homosexuality is the mistaken belief that gay men have more of a tendency than heterosexual men to sexually molest children. There is no evidence indicating that homosexuals are more likely than heterosexuals to molest children.

### Why do some gay men and lesbians tell people about their sexual orientation?

Because sharing that aspect of themselves with others is important to the mental health of lesbians and gay men. Life can be difficult when you feel as though you have to hide an important part of yourself. In fact, identifying themselves as a lesbian or a gay man, usually called 'coming out', has been found to be strongly related to psychological adjustment – the more positive a person feels as a gay male or a lesbian, the better that person's mental health will be. 'Coming out' is made necessary because individuals are assumed to be heterosexual unless there is evidence to the contrary.

### Why is the 'coming out' process difficult for some gays and lesbians?

Because of false stereotypes and unwarranted prejudice towards them, the process of 'coming out' for lesbians and gay men can be a very challenging process, which may cause emotional pain. Lesbians and gay men often feel 'different' and alone when they first become aware of same-sex attractions. They may also fear being rejected by family, friends, co-workers and religious institutions if they do 'come out'.

Homosexuals are frequently the targets of discrimination and violence. This threat of violence and discrimination is an obstacle to them developing sufficiently positive feelings about themselves. In a 1989 US survey, five per cent of the gay men and 10 per cent of the lesbian women reported physical abuse or

assault related to being lesbian or gay in the last year. A total of 47 per cent reported some form of discrimination over their lifetime. Australian surveys have shown similarly high rates of discrimination or violence.

Lesbians and gay men typically need the support of family and friends (and sometimes of counsellors and psychologists) during and immediately following 'coming out'. 'Coming out' often results in changes in an individual's relationships with others as a result of no longer being seen as heterosexual. Lesbians and gay men often seek the support of others in the gay community; such support can be very important in developing constructive same-sex relationships.

### **What can be done to help lesbians and gay men overcome prejudice and discrimination against them?**

The people who have the most positive attitudes toward homosexuality are those who say they know well one or more same-sex attracted persons. For this reason, psychologists believe negative attitudes toward gay men and lesbians are not grounded in actual experience with lesbians or gay men, but on stereotypes and prejudice.

Furthermore, protection against violence and discrimination are very important, just as they are for other minority groups. Some states have laws against discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation.

### **Can therapy change sexual orientation?**

**No.** Even though homosexual orientation is not a mental illness and there is no scientific reason to attempt conversion of lesbians or gays to heterosexual orientation, some individuals may want to change their own sexual orientation or that of another individual (for example, parents seeking therapy for their child). Some therapists who undertake this kind of therapy report that they have changed their client's sexual orientation (from homosexual to heterosexual) in treatment.

Close scrutiny of these reports shows that many of the claims come from organizations with an ideological perspective on sexual orientation rather than from mental health researchers. Also, the treatments and their outcomes are poorly documented and the length of time that clients are followed up after the treatment is sometimes too short to be a true reflection of the outcome. In other cases it has been shown that individuals can be assisted to live a heterosexual lifestyle, but that their sexual orientation remains unchanged. In other words, their pattern of arousal to members of the same sex does not alter.

The Australian Psychological Society acknowledges the lack of scientific evidence for the usefulness of conversion therapy, and notes that it can in fact be harmful for the individual. Changing the sexual orientation of a person is not simply a matter of changing the person's sexual behavior. It would require altering the emotional, romantic and sexual feelings of the person and restructuring self-concept and social identity. Although some mental health providers do attempt sexual orientation conversion, other practitioners question the ethics of trying to alter a trait that is not a disorder and that is extremely important to an individual's identity.

Many gay men and lesbians who seek therapy do not want to change their sexual orientation. Gay men and lesbians may seek counselling for the same reasons as anyone else. In addition, they may seek psychological help to 'come out' or to deal with prejudice, discrimination and violence.

### **Why it is important for society to be better educated about homosexuality?**

Educating all people about sexual orientation and homosexuality is likely to lessen anti-gay prejudice and minimize the risk of harassment and discrimination. Accurate information about homosexuality is

especially important to young people struggling with their own sexual identity. Although it is unclear what determines sexual orientation, those who study human development consider that what determines it takes place very early in life. Therefore fears that access to information about homosexuality will affect one's sexual orientation are not valid.

### **Where can I find more information about homosexuality?**

Further information about services and organizations for lesbians and gay men can be obtained from the APS Interest Group's web site:

<http://www.groups.psychology.org.au/glip/>

Your APS Psychologist has least six years of professional training and education to equip them to provide professional, timely and efficient service to you in the area of sexual orientation. You can access an APS Psychologist for professional assistance with both minor and major issues. APS Psychologists are able to provide immediate, short-term strategies and also provide long-term, ongoing support for more complex issues

### **Where to go for help**

To talk to an APS Psychologist today, ask your GP for a referral to PBP Consultancy or write to [prabu1@pbpconsultancy.com](mailto:prabu1@pbpconsultancy.com) or visit [www.pbpconsultancy.com](http://www.pbpconsultancy.com) T/ 61 41639056