

Sexual Orientation and Homosexuality

What Is Sexual Orientation?

Sexual orientation is an enduring emotional, romantic, sexual, or affectional attraction toward others. It is easily distinguished from other components of sexuality including biological sex, gender identity (the psychological sense of being male or female), and the social gender role (adherence to cultural norms for feminine and masculine behavior).

Sexual orientation exists along a continuum that ranges from exclusive heterosexuality to exclusive homosexuality and includes various forms of bisexuality. Bisexual persons can experience sexual, emotional, and affectional attraction to both their own sex and the opposite sex. Persons with a homosexual orientation are sometimes referred to as gay (both men and women) or as lesbian (women only).

Sexual orientation is different from sexual behavior because it refers to feelings and self-concept. Individuals may or may not express their sexual orientation in their behaviors.

What Causes a Person To Have a Particular Sexual Orientation?

There are numerous theories about the origins of a person's sexual orientation. Most scientists today agree that sexual orientation is most likely the result of a complex interaction of environmental, cognitive and biological factors. In most people, sexual orientation is shaped at an early age. There is also considerable recent evidence to suggest that biology, including genetic or inborn hormonal factors, play a significant role in a person's sexuality.

It's important to recognize that there are probably many reasons for a person's sexual orientation, and the reasons may be different for different people.

Is Sexual Orientation a Choice?

No, human beings cannot choose to be either gay or straight. For most people, sexual orientation emerges in early adolescence without any prior sexual experience. Although we can choose whether to act on our feelings, psychologists do not consider sexual orientation to be a conscious choice that can be voluntarily changed.

Can Therapy Change Sexual Orientation?

No; even though most homosexuals live successful, happy lives, some homosexual or bisexual people may seek to change their sexual orientation through therapy, often coerced by family members or religious groups to try and do so. The reality is that homosexuality is not an illness. It does not require treatment and is not

changeable. However, not all gay, lesbian, and bisexual people who seek assistance from a mental health professional want to change their sexual orientation. Gay, lesbian, and bisexual people may seek psychological help with the coming out process or for strategies to deal with prejudice, but most go into therapy for the same reasons and life issues that bring straight people to mental health professionals.

What About So-Called "Conversion Therapies"?

Some therapists who undertake so-called conversion therapy report that they have been able to change their clients' sexual orientation from homosexual to heterosexual. Close scrutiny of these reports, however, show several factors that cast doubt on their claims. For example, many of these claims come from organizations with an ideological perspective that condemns homosexuality. Furthermore, their claims are poorly documented; for example, treatment outcome is not followed and reported over time, as would be the standard to test the validity of any mental health intervention.

The American Psychological Association is concerned about such therapies and their potential harm to patients. In 1997, the Association's Council of Representatives passed a resolution reaffirming psychology's opposition to homophobia in treatment and spelling out a client's right to unbiased treatment and self-determination. Any person who enters into therapy to deal with issues of sexual orientation has a right to expect that such therapy will take place in a professionally neutral environment, without any social bias.

Is Homosexuality a Mental Illness or Emotional Problem?

No. Psychologists, psychiatrists, and other mental health professionals agree that homosexuality is not an illness, a mental disorder, or an emotional problem. More than 35 years of objective, well-designed scientific research has shown that homosexuality, in and itself, is not associated with mental disorders or emotional or social problems. Homosexuality was once thought to be a mental illness because mental health professionals and society had biased information.

In the past, the studies of gay, lesbian, and bisexual people involved only those in therapy, thus biasing the resulting conclusions. When researchers examined data about such people who were not in therapy, the idea that homosexuality was a mental illness was quickly found to be untrue.

In 1973 the American Psychiatric Association confirmed the importance of the new, better-designed research and removed homosexuality from the official manual that lists mental and emotional disorders. Two years later, the American Psychological Association passed a resolution supporting this removal.

For more than 25 years, both associations have urged all mental health professionals to help dispel the stigma of mental illness that some people still associate with homosexual orientation.

Can Lesbians, Gay Men, and Bisexuals 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 four critical areas: their intelligence, psychological adjustment, social adjustment, and popularity with friends. It is also important to realize that a parent's sexual orientation does not indicate their children's.

Another myth 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 to suggest that homosexuals molest children.

Why Do Some Gay Men, Lesbians, and Bisexuals Tell People About Their Sexual Orientation?

Because sharing that aspect of themselves with others is important to their mental health. In fact, the process of identity development for lesbians, gay men and bisexuals called "coming out" has been found to be strongly related to psychological adjustment; the more positive the gay, lesbian, or bisexual identity, the better one's mental health and the higher one's self-esteem.

Why Is the "Coming Out" Process Difficult for Some Gay, Lesbian and Bisexual People?

For some gay and bisexual people the "coming out" process is difficult; for others it is not. Often lesbian, gay and bisexual people feel afraid, different, and alone when they first realize that their sexual orientation is different from the community norm. This is particularly true for people becoming aware of their gay, lesbian, or bisexual orientation in childhood or adolescence, which is not uncommon. And depending on their families and their communities, they may have to struggle against prejudice and misinformation about homosexuality.

Children and adolescents may be particularly vulnerable to the harmful effects of bias and stereotypes. They may also fear being rejected by family, friends, co-workers, and religious institutions. Some gay people have to worry about losing their jobs or being harassed at school if their sexual orientation became well known.

Unfortunately, gay, lesbian, and bisexual people are at a higher risk for physical assault and violence than are heterosexuals. Studies done in California in the mid-1990s showed that nearly one-fifth of all lesbians who took part in the study, and more than one-fourth of all gay men who participated, had been the victim of a hate crime based on their sexual orientation. In another California study of approximately 500 young adults, half of all the young men participating in the study admitted to some form of anti-gay aggression, ranging from name-calling to physical violence.

What Can Be Done to Overcome the Prejudice and Discrimination that Gay Men, Lesbians, and Bisexuals Experience?

Research has found that the people who have the most positive attitudes toward gay men, lesbians, and bisexuals are those who say they know one or more gay, lesbian or bisexual person well, often as a friend or co-worker. For this reason, psychologists believe that negative attitudes toward gay people as a group are prejudices that are not grounded in actual experience but are based on stereotypes and misinformation. Furthermore, protection against violence and discrimination are very important, just as they are for any other minority groups. Some states include violence against an individual on the basis of his or her sexual orientation as a "hate crime," and ten U.S. states have laws against discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation.

Why Is it Important for Society to be Better Educated About Homosexuality?

Educating all people about sexual orientation and homosexuality is likely to diminish anti-gay prejudice.

Accurate information about homosexuality is especially important to young people who are first discovering and seeking to understand their sexuality, whether homosexual, bisexual, or heterosexual. Fears that access to such information will make more people gay have no validity; information about homosexuality does not make someone gay or straight.

Are All Gay and Bisexual Men HIV Infected?

No. This is a common myth. In reality, the risk of exposure to HIV is related to a person's behavior, not their sexual orientation. What's important to remember about HIV/AIDS is that contracting the disease can be prevented by using safe sex practices and by not using drugs.

(c) Copyright 2004 American Psychological Association

Documents from apahelpcenter.org may be reprinted in their entirety with credit given to the American Psychological Association. Any exceptions to this, including requests to excerpt or paraphrase documents from apahelpcenter.org, must be presented in writing to helping@apa.org and will be considered on a case-by-case basis. Permission for exceptions will be given on a one-time-only basis and must be sought for each additional use of the document.