

For LGBT or Questioning Youth

FIRST STEPS: QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS
ON SEXUAL ORIENTATION AND GENDER IDENTITY

PFLAG LOS ANGELES

Coming to terms with your sexual orientation or gender identity can be tough. The world seems to revolve around heterosexuality. It's not surprising if you are asking where you fit and if you are okay. Here are answers to some questions you may have.

How do you know for sure that you are LGBT? Sexuality develops over time. You'll gradually find that you're drawn mostly to men or to women or to both, and then you'll know. And you don't have to be sexually active to know. Your feelings and your emotional and physical attractions will tell you.

I don't see anyone like me. Am I the only one? There are lots of people like you! Most studies estimate that between 4.5 to 10 percent of the population is LGBT. They are white, black, Asian, Latino, and Native American. They're Protestant, Catholic, Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist and members of other religions. They are doctors, nurses, construction workers, teachers, students, secretaries, ministers, rabbis, store clerks, mechanics, business people, police officers, members of the armed forces, politicians and athletes.

Is it okay to be LGBT? Yes. Being gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender is as okay, natural, and healthy as being straight. Although no one knows exactly how human gender identity or

sexual orientation are determined, research shows it's a combination of genetics, biology, and environment. Your sexual orientation or gender identity could be set before birth or as early as two or three years old. Being LGBT is just a human variation like being left-handed or brown eyed.

Can I be "fixed"? Being LGBT is not a disorder—physical, mental, or spiritual. Because homosexuality and gender identity are not chosen, you cannot change your mind about being LGBT. "Ex gay" ministries and "reparative therapy" are controversial and not recommended by mainstream professional organizations. They may change behavior, but they have never been shown to change underlying sexual orientation. Some people have reported an increase in depression, suicidal thoughts, and self-destructive behavior following these treatments.

I don't fit the LGBT stereotype. Am I still gay? LGBT people, like straight people, act in all kinds of ways. Some are athletic, others aren't. Some are artistic, others aren't. Some are best dressers, others live in jeans and a t-shirt. Ignore stereotypes. They arise out of ignorance, and never fit everyone in the group they are trying to categorize. Just be yourself.

Are people of color LGBT? Yes, they make up approximately 4.5 to 10 percent of people of color as in other populations. In some ethnic groups, LGBT people may not be as visible because of the special challenges a double identity poses. Some of those challenges include association with churches that disapprove of homosexuality, strong family foundations that emphasize heterosexuality, homophobia in the ethnic community, and racism in the broader gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender community. As more and more people of color come out, the atmosphere is changing and resources are growing.

Do I need to worry about HIV/AIDS? Yes. Everybody—gay and straight, male, female and transgender—needs to be informed about the causes and methods of prevention for

HIV/AIDS. HIV is spread by sexual contact with an infected person and by sharing needles and/or syringes employed in drug use. Neither age nor sexual orientation protects you from getting the virus, so learn about and use safer sex practices every time.

Should I come out? Only when you want to and are ready. And only when you have assessed the risks of coming out. Don't let yourself be pressured. Before you come out, you may want to become more educated about sexual orientation and gender identity for your own information and to be able to respond to questions or misinformation people have. Choose carefully the first people you tell. They should be people who will accept you, support you, and respect your privacy. Think about how they react to a gay character on television or to gay issues in the news. Be prepared to be patient. Just like you had to educate yourself about LGBT issues, they may need time to learn, too.

How do I tell my parent(s) or guardian(s)? You need to feel ready and have a plan to deal with any consequences. What are your parent/guardians general reactions to LGBT persons? Have your parents shown they love you even when they are upset with you? Do you have someone to call if you need support? A place to stay if things don't go well? What will you do if your parents threaten to cut off financial support? When you can answer all these questions, then you are ready to speak with them. And remember—be patient. You've been thinking about your sexual orientation or gender identity for a while. It's new to them.

What if I'm being harassed at school? Harassment can be anything from name calling and shunning to physical violence on or off campus by students or even teachers. You have the right to a safe learning environment. Try talking to a supportive teacher (one with a "safe zone" sticker, for example). Talk to your parent(s) or guardian(s) if you are out and they are supportive. Find out your school's policies about discrimination. You can also contact PFLAG, Lambda Legal, and the Human Rights Campaign for information about dealing with unresponsive schools.

Will I lose my straight friends? You probably won't lose your straight friends. Some may be supportive immediately. Others may need time to adjust to the idea of your being LGBT. They, too, are dealing with their emerging sexuality and may be afraid of what this disclosure means about your relationship and about them. Have patience and refer them to accurate information about sexual orientation and gender identity.

Where do I find LGBT friends? You may be able to find them right at your own school, if your school has a Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA). You can also find them through organizations for LGBT teens like Lifeworks at the Los Angeles Gay and Lesbian Center. There are supervised websites like Teenline and the GLBT National Youth Talkline, where you can chat on the phone or online to a trained peer mentor.

Can I have a family of my own? Yes. Many same-sex couples form long lasting family units, have commitment ceremonies, register for civil unions, and in eight states and the District of Columbia, get married. Same sex couples also have and raise children together. Some are raising children from previous heterosexual relationships. In some states, LGBT couples adopt children or become foster parents. LGBT couples have biological children through artificial insemination and surrogacy. Don't stop dreaming. You have an exciting, fulfilling future ahead.

Will I have a happy life? There's no reason why you can't. You are already taking the steps to a fulfilling life by getting to know yourself and being honest about your feelings. LGBT people are successful in all walks of life; have deep and satisfying relationships with partners, family and friends; experience the joys of parenthood; and are valued members of their communities and religious congregations. All you have to do is be yourself.

RESOURCES

Organizations

PFLAG National: pflag.org

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Gay-Straight Alliance Network: gsanetwork.org

Gay, Lesbian & Straight Education Network (GLSEN): glsen.org

The GLBT National Youth Talkline: glnh.org
800-246-7743

LifeWorks: lifeworksla.org

Safe Schools Assistance, LAUSD: stephen.jimenez@lausd.net
Stephen B. Jimenez, Project 10 Specialist

Teenline: teenlineonline.org

Trevor Project: thetrevorproject.org
(24/7 helpline and suicide prevention) 866-4-U-TREVOR

Visit the PFLAG Los Angeles website for more information: pflagLA.org



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