

What is Sexual Orientation?

Sexual orientation refers to one's romantic, emotional, or sexual attraction to another person of

- * the opposite sex (a heterosexual or "straight" sexual orientation),
- * the same sex (a homosexual or gay/lesbian sexual orientation), or
- * both (a bisexual orientation).

What is Homosexuality?

Homosexuality refers to sexual attraction to one's own gender or sex. Homosexuality can be felt in three important ways: desire, behavior, and identity. Homosexual desire refers to a sexual attraction to members of the same sex. Behavior refers to sexual activity with members of the same sex. Identity refers to thinking of oneself as gay, lesbian or bisexual. Homosexuality may include any combination of desire, behavior, or identity. The strength of these feelings may vary from person to person and over time within the same person (especially for women).

Homosexuality is not a mental disorder. All major professional mental health organizations have gone on record to affirm that homosexuality is not a mental disorder. In 1973, the American Psychiatric Association removed homosexuality from its official diagnostic manual, the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM)*.

What Causes Sexual Orientation?

The causes of sexual orientation and homosexuality are unknown. Studies have suggested both genetic and non-genetic factors. Sexual attraction (whether gay or straight), in fact, might have several origins including genetic factors for some people, environmental factors for others, or some combinations of these factors for yet others. Most mental health professionals believe that sexual orientation is determined for most people early in life, or even before birth, and therefore is not chosen. No particular pattern or style of parenting has been shown to cause homosexuality.

Can Homosexuality Be Changed?

The desire to change sexual orientation often is driven more by social stigma or religious concerns than by medical or mental health concerns. Some homosexual people are able to change their sexual behavior (albeit with great difficulty). A change in behavior, however, is only one aspect of homosexuality and does not imply that sexual orientation has changed, particularly if desire remains.

Most psychiatrists have come to the conclusion that sexual orientation is not likely to change through any form of mental health treatment. Efforts to try to force an individual to change his or her orientation are very likely to be unsuccessful and in the end can seriously damage the self-esteem of people who fail. Most psychiatrists therefore encourage their homosexual patients to come to terms with homosexuality and to accept themselves as they are.

What is the Process of Coming Out?

"Coming out" is the term used to describe the experience in which a person identifies himself or herself as gay, lesbian or bisexual. Coming out is not a one-time event, but a lifelong process of identifying as gay, lesbian, or bisexual – first to one's self and then to friends, family, coworkers, and others. Each gay or lesbian person's experience in coming out is unique. There are many resources available to help gay and lesbian people with this process.

Gays/Lesbians: Marriage and Parenting

Sustained and committed marital and family relationships are cornerstones of social support networks and have a positive influence on the physical and mental health of family members. This is why the American Psychiatric Association supports the legal recognition of same-sex civil marriage with all rights, benefits, and responsibilities conferred by civil marriage.

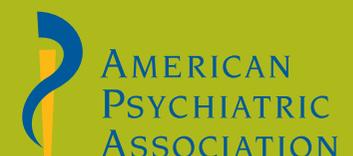
Many gay men and women are parents. Some had children in prior heterosexual relationships. An increasing number of gay parents have children and raise them from birth either as single parents or in committed relationships. Often this is done through alternative insemination or adoption. Numerous studies have shown that the children of gay parents are as likely to be healthy and well adjusted as children raised in heterosexual households. Children raised in gay or lesbian households do not show any greater incidence of homosexuality or gender identity issues than other children. Children raised with gay/lesbian parents can encounter some special challenges related to the ongoing stigma against homosexuality, but most children overcome these problems.

Sexual Orientation

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Resources

For more information, please contact:

American Psychiatric Association (APA)

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Suite 1825
Arlington, VA 22209
703-907-7300
www.healthyminds.org

American Psychological Association

750 First Street, NE
Washington, DC 20002-4242
(800) 374-2721 or (202) 336-5500
www.apa.org

Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation

5455 Wilshire Blvd, #1500
Los Angeles, CA 90036
323-933-2240
www.glaad.org

Human Rights Campaign

1640 Rhode Island Ave., N.W.
Washington, DC 20036-3200
(202) 628-4160
www.hrc.org

Parents, Family and Friends of Lesbians and Gays

1726 M Street, NW
Suite 400
Washington, D.C. 20036
(202) 467-8180
www.pflag.org

Ordering Information

Brochures may be ordered by visiting www.appi.org or calling 800-368-5777. The brochures are sold by topic in packets of 50. Discount pricing is available for bulk quantities of five or more packets. Please email bulksales@psych.org for more information. APA physician members receive a 10% discount.

One in a series of brochures designed to reduce stigma associated with mental illnesses by promoting informed factual discussion of the disorders and their psychiatric treatments. This brochure was developed for educational purposes and does not necessarily reflect opinion or policy of the American Psychiatric Association. For more information, please visit www.healthyminds.org.

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