

LGBTQ+ Q&A



If you are just starting to learn about lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people (or if you are one) there are hundreds of questions you may have. Below are just a few of the most frequently asked questions that people ask as they start on their journey of acceptance.

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

They tell about it 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.

How can I get support after a LGBT loved one has come out to me?

PFLAG offers local support and education all across the country. Members in PFLAG chapters know what you're going through and can help. You may be experiencing an array of emotions such as grief, guilt, and denial, and you could be facing new questions about your relationship with your LGBT loved one. Whatever your reaction, remember that your loved one is sharing one part of his/her identity with you and is ultimately the same person as yesterday. See the LGBTQ+ 101 resource packet for additional resources.

Is the person who just came out to me just rebelling, experimenting, or going through a phase?

It is natural to try to think of this new information as "just a phase." However, because our culture is still predominantly anti-gay, there is very little chance that someone who is heterosexual would choose to live as gay.

Keep in mind that you would probably never ask "Are you sure you're straight?"

Please remember that someone who has "come out" to you has usually gone through a long and hard process of acknowledging his/her own sexual orientation. The fact that your LGBT loved one came out to you shows their love for you and desire to have an honest relationship with you. It may also be a sign of a need for support.

How are sexual orientation and gender identity determined?

No one knows exactly how sexual orientation and gender identity determined. However, experts agree that it is a complicated matter of genetics, biology, psychological and social factors. For most people, sexual orientation and gender identity are shaped at any early age. While research has not determined a cause, homosexuality and gender variance are not the result of any one factor like parenting or past experiences. It is never anyone's "fault" if they or their loved one grows up to be LGBT. If you are asking yourself why you or your loved one is LGBT, consider asking yourself another question: Why ask why? Does your response to a LGBT person depend on knowing why they are LGBT? Regardless of cause, LGBT people deserve equal rights and to be treated fairly.

Is there something wrong with being lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender?

No. There have been people in all cultures and times throughout human history who have identified themselves as lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender (LGBT). Homosexuality is not an illness or a disorder, a fact that is agreed upon by both the American Psychological Association and the American Psychiatric Association. Homosexuality was removed from the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM) of the American Psychiatric Association in 1974. Being transgender or gender-variant is not a disorder either, although Gender Identity Dysphoria (GID) is still listed in the DSM of the American Psychiatric Association. Being LGBT is as much a human variation as being left-handed - a person's sexual orientation and gender identity are just another piece of who they are. There is nothing wrong with being LGBT - in fact, there's a lot to celebrate.

I accept gay people, but why do they have to flaunt it?

Heterosexuals "flaunt" their orientation constantly, with overt displays of affection, fashion and manners to attract the opposite sex, conversation about lovers and spouses, and pictures of loved ones proudly displayed at work, yet many people are uncomfortable, even angry, when they see public displays of affection between members of the same sex. Because we have all been taught the untruth that something is wrong with LGBT orientation, this discomfort is understandable. But this belief is our problem, not a problem for LGBT people. If you feel that displays of sexual orientation should be private, then this should apply to everyone, both straight and gay.

Can people change their sexual orientation or gender identity?

No – and efforts to do so aren't just unnecessary – they're damaging. Religious and secular organizations do sponsor campaigns and studies claiming that LGBT people can change their sexual orientation or gender identity because there is something wrong. PFLAG believes that it is our anti-LGBT attitudes, laws and policies that need to change, not our LGBT loved ones.

These studies and campaigns suggesting that LGBT people can change are based on ideological biases and not peer-reviewed solid science. No studies show proven long-term changes in gay or transgender people, and many reported changes are based solely on behavior and not a person's actual self-identity. The American Psychological Association has stated that scientific evidence shows that reparative therapy (therapy which claims to change LGBT people) does not work and that it can do more harm than good.

Should I be worried about my loved one contracting HIV or AIDS?

HIV/AIDS is not a "gay" disease, and it is nothing to be ashamed of. HIV is spread via various bodily fluid exchanges (sex, blood transfusions, unsterilized needles, etc). It is often believed that HIV/AIDS is the result of living a sexually promiscuous life, however this is not true; HIV/AIDS says nothing about the sexual orientation, gender identity, or sexual choices of those who are HIV positive. In many parts of the world, the disease has attacked mostly heterosexual and there is no medical reason to shun those who are HIV positive. Please keep in mind: all people with HIV/AIDS need love and care; to show our love and support is more important than ever when a person has HIV/AIDS.

How can I reconcile my or my loved one's sexual orientation with my faith?

This is a difficult question for many people. Learning that a loved one is LGBT can be a challenge if you feel it is at odds with your faith tradition. However, being LGBT does not impact a person's ability to be moral and spiritual any more than being heterosexual does. Many LGBT people are religious and active in their own faith communities. It is up to you to explore, question and make choices in order to reconcile religion with homosexuality and gender variance. For some this means working for change within their faith community, and for others it means leaving it. PFLAG offers a number of resources in this area, including our Welcoming Faith Communities project and our publication, Faith in Our Families. Also see the LGBTQ+ 101 resource packet for additional resources.

How does someone know they are lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender?

Some people say that they have "felt different" or knew they were attracted to people of the same sex from the time they were very young. Some transgender people talk about feeling from an early age that their gender identity did not match parental and social expectations. Others do not figure out their sexual orientation or gender identity until they are adolescents or adults. Often it can take a while for people to put a label to their feelings, or people's feelings may change over time.

Understanding sexuality and gender can be a lifelong process, and people shouldn't worry about labeling themselves right away. However, with positive images of LGBT people more readily available, it is becoming easier for people to identify their feelings and come out at earlier ages. People don't have to be sexually active to know their sexual orientation - feelings and emotions are as much a part of one's identity. The short answer is that you'll know when you know.

Should I talk to a loved one about their sexual orientation or gender identity before the person talks to me?

It's seldom appropriate to ask a person, "Are you gay?" Your perception of another person's sexual orientation (gay or straight) or gender identity (male or female) is not necessarily what it appears. No one can know for sure unless the person has actually declared that they are gay, straight, bisexual, or transgender. PFLAG recommends creating a safe space by showing your support of LGBT issues on a non-personal level. For example, take an interest in openly discussing and learning about topics such as same-sex marriage or LGBT rights in the workplace. Learn about LGBT communities and culture. Come out as an ally, regardless of if your friend or loved one is LGBT.

Read PFLAG's Dos and Don'ts for Friends and Families (<http://community.pflag.org/page.aspx?pid=541>) to get some tips should the "coming out day" happen. Your ultimate goal is to provide a safe space for your loved one to approach you when he or she is ready without fear of negative consequences.

How do I come out to my family and friends?

There are many questions to consider before coming out. Are you comfortable with your sexuality and gender identity/expression? Do you have support? Can you be patient? What kind of views do your friends and family have about homosexuality and gender variance? Are you financially dependent on your family? Make sure you have thought your decision through, have a plan and supportive people you can turn to. Just as you needed to experience different stages of acceptance for yourself, family and loved ones may need to go through a similar process. Your loved ones will need time to adjust to your news, the same way you may have needed time to come to terms with yourself. However, true acceptance is possible and happens every day, especially with education and support.

Can gay and transgender people have families?

Yes! LGBT people can and do have families. Same-sex couples do form committed and loving relationships. In the United States many same-sex couples choose to celebrate their love with commitment ceremonies or civil unions, although these couples are not offered the rights and benefits of marriage. More and more LGBT couples are also raising children together, although state laws on adoption and foster parenting vary. And of course, many LGBT people have the support of the loving families they were born into, or the families that they have created with their other friends and loved ones. As the saying goes, all it takes is love to make a family.