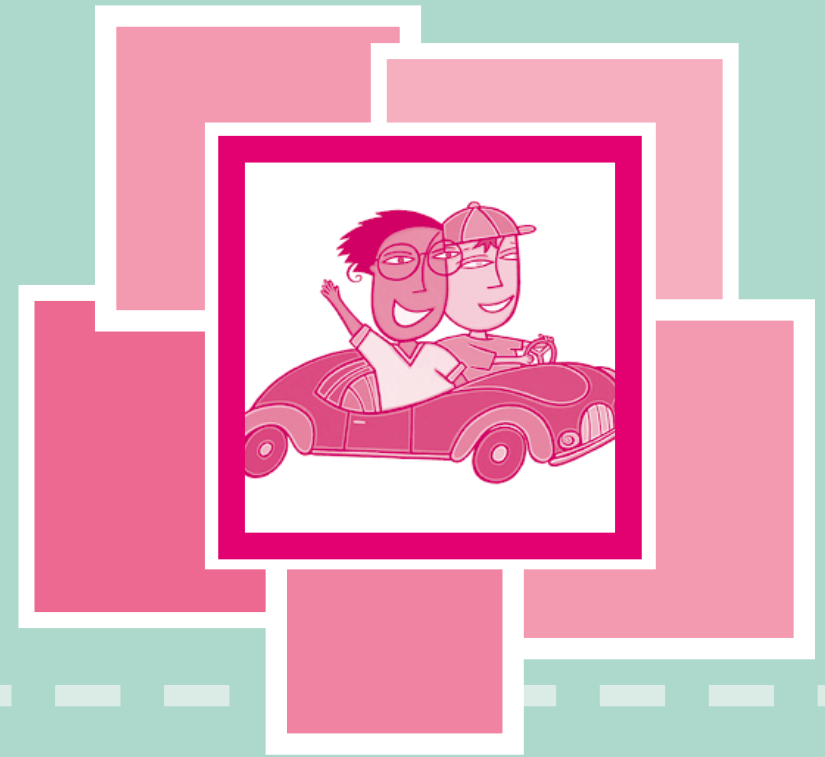




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I Think I Might Be Gay, Now What Do I Do?

A Brochure by and for Young Men

What Does It Mean to Be Gay?

Men who call themselves gay are sexually attracted to and fall in love with other men. Their sexual feelings toward men are normal and natural for them. These feelings emerge when they are boys, and the feelings continue throughout life. Although some gay men may also be attracted to women, they usually say that their attraction to men is stronger and more important to them. Some experts estimate that about one in 10 people in the world may be gay or lesbian. (Lesbians are women who are attracted to other women.) This means that in any large group of people, there are usually several gay or lesbian people present. However, no one can tell whether someone is gay unless he or she wants it known. Gay people blend right in with other people, but they often *feel* different from other people. Gay teenagers may not be able to specify just *why* they feel different. They may notice that all of the guys they know seem to be attracted to girls. So, gay teens don't always know where they fit in, and they may not feel comfortable talking with adults about their feelings.

How Do I Know if I'm Gay?

For as long as I can remember, I'd always felt different from other kids. Around the age of eleven, I started having random sexual feelings for people of both genders. I read some sex ed books and figured that my feelings were part of a phase and would pass. I didn't realize until I was fifteen that it was my feelings for girls that were part of a phase that passed.

Diablo, Pennsylvania, age 18



I was slow realizing that what I felt was homosexual. Since about the sixth grade I hadn't allowed myself to think about guys in a sexual manner because I knew it was wrong. It was sometime in the tenth grade when I realized that I am what I am and there is nothing wrong with me.

Joseph, Georgia, age 16

You may not know what to call your sexual feelings. You don't have to rush to decide how to label yourself right now. Sexual identity develops over time. Most adolescent boys are intensely sexual during the years around puberty (usually between 11 and 15 years old), when the body starts changing and hormones are flowing. Your sexual feelings may be so strong that they are not directed toward particular people or situations but seem to emerge without cause. As you get older, you will figure out who really attracts you. Boys with truly gay feelings find that, over time, their attraction to boys and men gets more and more clearly focused. You may find yourself falling in love with a classmate or developing a crush on a particular adult man. You may find these experiences pleasurable, troubling, or a mix of the two. By age 16 or 17, some gay youth begin thinking about what to call themselves, while others need more clarity on the subject. If you think you might be gay, here are some questions you might ask yourself:

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- When I dream or fantasize sexually, is it about boys or girls?
- Have I ever had a crush on or been in love with a boy or a man?
- Do I feel different than the other guys?
- Are my feelings for boys and men clear?

If your answers to these questions are not clear, don't worry. You will be more certain in time of your sexual identity. Only you will know how to label yourself correctly.

Am I Normal?



I was thrilled the first time I saw someone wearing a pride pin and was able to get some information from her. The first time that I went to a gay group, it was, quite simply, a relief.

Matt, Quebec, age 16

I felt a relief, a ... lessening of the sensation of total isolation and loneliness ... and definitely a feeling of release to finally be able to talk freely about homosexuality.

Marie, Minnesota, age 18

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Yes, you are absolutely normal. Many people are gay. Do you want to learn more? Start by reading. If you feel comfortable doing so, ask the librarian in the Young Adult section of your public library. Librarians are usually glad to help. Moreover, librarians operate under a strict code of ethics and are legally obliged to guard the privacy of *all* patrons, including minors. If your public library does not have much on sexuality, the reference librarian can request good books and journal articles through interlibrary loan. Or, you may want to check out the Gay section of a large bookstore. Finally, you may want to order books and other materials through the mail. However, be aware that not all books about gay people are supportive.

Advocates for Youth has web sites by and for young gay people, www.youthresource.com and www.ambientejuven.org. You may wish to visit these web sites. More than 15,000 gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender youth visit them each month; most of them visit repeatedly. Most major cities also have a gay hotline, and you might want to call it. If you are concerned about your privacy, call from a phone booth. A good hotline counselor will let you talk about your feelings and will direct you to organizations that help gay people. There may even be a gay youth group in your area. There are gay people wherever you are. Sooner or later you will meet someone who feels some of the same things you do and has had similar experiences.

What about HIV/AIDS

We all need to be careful. I make sure that, when I am with someone, we always use protection.

Eric, Michigan, age 16

I feel that the topic of safer sex must be broached directly, and if it is truly a good relationship, talking about safer sex will not cause problems.

Kip, Iowa, age 18

All sexually active people need to be aware of human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) - the virus that causes AIDS - as well as other sexually transmitted diseases (STDs). Being gay will not infect you with HIV, but certain sexual practices and certain drug use behaviors can put you at risk for infection with HIV. HIV/AIDS is incurable, but it is preventable!

Here's how to reduce your risk of HIV infection and AIDS.

1. Do not shoot up drugs. Sharing needles is the most dangerous behavior for putting you at risk of HIV infection.
2. Communicate with your partner. You do not have to have sex.
3. Choose activities that do not involve sexual intercourse - such as hugging, kissing, talking, or massage.
4. Avoid unprotected anal intercourse or other direct, unprotected anal contact. Anal intercourse transmits HIV very efficiently. If you engage in anal intercourse, use a condom every time.
5. Use condoms whenever you engage in any type of sexual intercourse - anal, oral, or vaginal.
6. Choose latex condoms that are fresh and undamaged. Store them away from heat. Remember: Your wallet is *not* a good place to keep condoms for a long period of time.
7. Use a condom only once. Choose condoms with a "reservoir tip" and be sure to squeeze out the air from the tip as you put it on. Hold on to the condom as you take it off. Be aware that condoms sometimes slip off.

How Do I Learn to Like Myself?

I think what helps me the most is being able to accept who I am as a person - knowing my goals, my hopes, my feelings about life. The most beautiful benefit is being able then to accept my orientation.

Tyson, California, age 17

The most beneficial resource to me is my friends. Their support has helped me through rough times and made my good times even brighter. I share my innermost worries and, in turn, get a glimpse of theirs, thus seeing that I am not alone in what I face. I feel that being open and honest with myself and with others helps me learn even more about myself.

Kip, Iowa, age 18

It's not easy to discover that you are gay. Many people are uncomfortable being around lesbians and gay men, and some people hate lesbians and gay men. It's no wonder if some gay youth might choose to hide gay feelings from others. You might feel this way; you might even be tempted to hide these feelings from yourself. You may worry about people finding out about how you feel. Maybe you avoid other youth that may be gay because you worry about what other people will think.

Working this hard to conceal your thoughts and feelings is called "being in the closet." It is a painful and lonely place to be, especially if you stay there in order to survive. It takes a lot of energy to deny your feelings, and denial can be costly. You may have tried using alcohol or other drugs to numb yourself against your feelings and your worries. You may have considered suicide. If so, please consult the phone book for the Samaritans or another suicide hotline. You and your feelings are valuable, and you have alternatives to denial. Check out the resources listed in the resource pamphlet in this series.

Whom Should I Tell?

The time in which each person decides to come out is completely up to him and should in no way be a decision made by someone else. Youth who feel the desire to talk with others about their feelings should find a place where they feel safe.

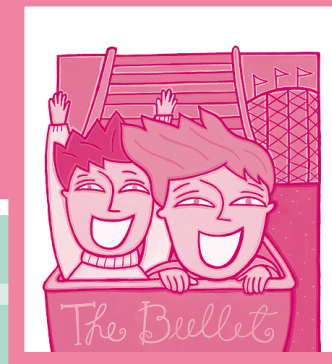
Chris, Maryland, age 21

The people who bring the most positive results from telling are just the people who accept it, and who don't only say it's okay, but show they mean it by the way they treat you.

Marie, Minnesota, age 18

It makes you feel a lot better to get it all out, I'll tell you. You shouldn't try to pretend to be someone you are not. You can keep your love life private, but your sexuality is as much a part of you as your skin.

Ethan, England, age 16



More and more gay youth are learning to feel better about themselves. As you start to listen to your deepest feelings and learn more about what being gay means, you will begin to be comfortable with your sexuality. This is the process called 'coming out.' The first step in coming out is to tell yourself that you are gay and to say, "That's okay. I'm okay." Later you may want to tell someone else - someone you trust to be understanding and sympathetic. You might choose a friend your own age, a sibling, a parent, or other adult. Some gay youth are able to come out to their families. Others are not. Start slow with someone you trust and the rest will unfold as it should.

In the beginning, be cautious about whom you tell, but be honest with yourself. Just as self-denial costs you, coming out will pay off. When gay youth accept their sexuality, most say they feel calmer, happier, and more confident.

Adapted from a brochure from the Campaign to End Homophobia.