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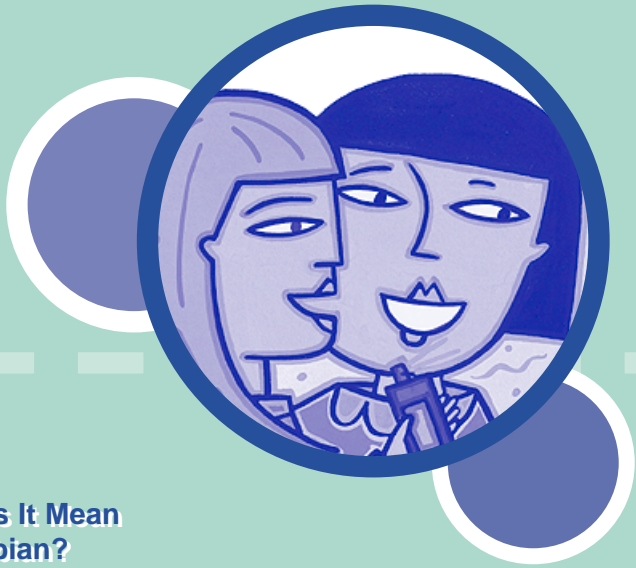


I Think I Might Be Lesbian, Now What Do I Do?

A Brochure by and for Young Women

What Does It Mean to Be Lesbian?

Lesbians are women who love women. Lesbians are sexually attracted to other women and their sexual feelings toward other women are normal and natural for them. Lesbians say they feel emotionally and spiritually closer to women and prefer intimate relationships with women. Experts estimate that about one out of 10 people may be lesbian or gay, and many historically famous women were lesbians. Lesbians include teachers, doctors, lawyers, factory workers, police officers, politicians, ministers, movie stars, artists, mothers, nuns, truck drivers, models, and novelists. Lesbians are white, black, Asian, Hispanic, and Native American. They may be Jewish, Catholic, Protestant, or Buddhist. Lesbians may be rich, poor, working class, or middle class, young or old. Some lesbians are in heterosexual marriages. Some lesbians are disabled.



How Do I Know if I'm Lesbian?

I had always been attracted to girls. I remember having crushes [on girls] since the third grade though I didn't consider myself a lesbian. In the third grade, I didn't even know what a lesbian was. It didn't dawn on me until the seventh grade that... hey, I'm a lesbian.

Kristine, Michigan, age 16

Well, knowing was never the question. It was accepting it that was [the question]. I started being attracted to girls at age seven, so I knew that I wasn't straight. It just took me a while to say to myself, I'm a lesbian and I'm okay.

Lenore, Illinois, age 16

During adolescence, most young women begin to be aware of sexual feelings and to take an interest in dating. Many young women feel physically attracted to men. But other young women feel physically attracted to women. You may notice that you feel "turned on" by other women. You may feel different from your girlfriends, like you don't fit in sometimes. When your girlfriends are checking out the guys, you may find yourself checking out other women. Going out with men may not interest you. You may find yourself wondering, "Why aren't there any men like these terrific women I keep meeting?"

You may also feel confused or unsure about whether or not you're a lesbian. You may feel confused because you're attracted to both men and women, and that's okay. Some women have relationships with both men and women throughout their lives. Some women eventually decide to be exclusively lesbian or exclusively heterosexual. Sexuality usually develops over time, so don't worry if you aren't sure.

Am I Normal?



People tend to focus on the sex part of homosexuality ... that's what they picture. They don't understand that there is love involved, too. Whoever you fall in love with, that is normal sexuality. Normal is in the eye of the beholder.

Kristine, Michigan, age 16

Normal is different for every individual. I cannot dictate someone else's life, body, or anything else by my standards. I tend to laugh at people who are close-minded. Also, I speak up in school when anyone makes the slightest homophobic comment.

Rachel, Maryland, age 17

Yes, you are normal. Many people are lesbian. Many experts agree that a person's sexual orientation is determined at a young age, even as early as birth. It's normal and healthy to be yourself, whether you're gay or straight. What's really important is learning to like yourself.

What Is It Like to be Young and Lesbian?

Difficult - some days I don't want to be gay. But, I just love women too much to ever dream of hiding it again.

Red, Australia, age 20

I used to be confused by that part of my personality; but, through time, it became a very important and precious part [of me]. It is hard to deal with other people, but at least I'm not lying and that makes me feel good. I have a right to be who I am, and I am willing to fight for it. This is not to say that it's been easy, because at times it's unbearable, but if I could change my sexual orientation, I would not.

Jessie, New York, age 16

There's no right way or wrong way to be a lesbian. Growing up with society's stereotypes about lesbians might make you think you have to be a certain way if you're a lesbian. Your sexual orientation is only one part of who you are. You probably have hobbies and interests that are the same as those of some of your straight friends. Homophobia means some people don't accept lesbians and gay men, and lesbian and gay people often suffer from discrimination and violence. That's why there are many gay and lesbian organizations that work for gay and lesbian civil rights.

What about HIV/AIDS?

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I believe that if you're going to have sex, have it safely even if you are a lesbian. I am a virgin. But, if I was with someone and we were having sex, it would be protected sex. Before we did that though, we'd both get tested, and if she refused, then maybe I should rethink being with her.

April, Michigan, age 16

I insist on safer sex. Despite the rumor that dykes are indestructible, I'm not taking any chances. I always tell my partner, up-front, that I demand safer sex.

Rayne, Pennsylvania, age 17

My principle is, if you're not ready to talk about safer sex with your partner, then you're probably not ready to have sex. It's imperative to know the risks you may be encountering.

Annie, Minnesota, age 17

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Everyone should know about HIV, the virus that causes AIDS, how it's transmitted, and how to prevent infection. You and your partner should discuss your risk factors and hers for HIV infection and decide what safer sex methods to use. Lesbians who are at risk are those who:

- Share needles if using injection drugs
- Have vaginal intercourse with men without using condoms (Remember that it's fairly common for young lesbians to have sexual contact with men at least occasionally.)
- Have oral sex with an infected woman without using barrier protection.

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

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 other than sex to show affection: hugging, kissing, talking, massage.
4. Use a dental dam or other latex barrier for oral intercourse. A dental dam is a square piece of latex about five inches on each side, designed for use in dental surgery, and available at dental and medical supply stores. A latex condom, cut down the middle, or plastic wrap can also be effective.
5. Use a latex barrier like surgical gloves when stimulating a partner with your fingers, especially if you have even the smallest cut or rash on your hands.
6. Always use a condom if you have sexual intercourse with a man.

How Do I Learn To Like Myself?



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Talking to someone is the best help that I found. It makes you feel less alone. Movies, books, and web sites are helpful when there's no one to ask about stuff or when you're feeling down or embarrassed to talk about something. I use a gay and lesbian chat room; it helps me find people to talk to.

Red, Australia, age 20

It helps to learn to look inside yourself and to see that the gay part of your personality exists together with, not separate from and not in spite of, all other parts of yourself. It helps to see how everything you do or are is somehow affected by your sexual orientation. I often look back on everything that's happened and cannot imagine not being gay.

Jessie, New York, age 16

Everyone needs to feel good about him/herself. All people are valuable. Developing self-esteem is very important for young people, and it can be difficult for gay and lesbian youth to feel good about themselves when many people around them believe that lesbians and gays are sick or perverted or destined to live unhappy lives. Feeling like you have to hide who you really are could make you feel like hurting yourself, taking senseless risks, using alcohol or other drugs, or attempting suicide. You may feel isolated, fearful, and depressed, especially if you've had no one to talk to about being lesbian. But, more and more young lesbians are learning to like themselves.

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You can find help by reading good books by and about lesbians - books with accurate information about lesbians who are leading fulfilling lives. Meeting other lesbians helps, too, because then you discover that lesbians are as diverse as any other group of people and that society is full of misinformation about lesbians. You can say to yourself every day, "I'm a lesbian and I'm okay." Find someone to talk to who also believes that lesbians are okay. Check out Advocates for Youth's web sites, www.youthresource.com and www.ambientejoven.org. These web sites are developed by and for young lesbian and gay people. Over 15,000 young gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender youth visit the sites each month; many visit repeatedly. You will find a community of support. Remember that it's normal and natural to be lesbian, just like it's normal and natural to be heterosexual.

Whom Should I Tell?



When you feel confident, the best person to tell is the person that you believe will accept you and love you for who you are.

Lenore, Oregon, age 16

There is never a definitely good time to tell a person because telling does reconstruct someone's view of you, liberal or not. So, it is always a bit of a jolt to the person you inform. But, once you've gotten over that hump, then if they react positively, you're home free. It is when they turn cold and don't speak to you that you know they weren't your friends to begin with.

Rayne, Pennsylvania, age 17

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Coming out is the process of accepting yourself as a lesbian and figuring out how open you want to be about your sexual orientation. A lot of people don't understand about lesbians, and it may be hard to know who will listen and be supportive. Some friends will accept you. Others may turn away from you or tell other people without your permission. Telling family can sometimes be difficult. Some families are highly supportive, and some are not. Start slow. Choose a friend your own age, a sibling, parent, or other adult, such as a guidance counselor, social worker in your school or in a local counseling or youth-serving agency. It's important to talk with someone you can trust because it's not normal or healthy for young people to have to keep secret such an important part of their lives.

How Can I Find Other Women Like Me?

I finally had the nerve to go to a GLBT youth group. I don't think I uttered even ten words for about a month. I was just in awe that there were people who felt just like me. It was a wonderful thing.

Kristine, Michigan, age 16

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Make contact with local women's organizations, such as the National Organization for Women (NOW). Many colleges and universities have campus women's and gay and lesbian organizations. Check the phone book for a local hotline and ask local gay and lesbian organizations about gay and lesbian youth groups in your area. Look for a local gay and lesbian newspaper. Check with local bookstores, health food stores, and gay bars for copies.

Adapted from a brochure from the Campaign to End Homophobia. Special thanks to Tsipporah Lieberman.