LEARN TO UNDERSTAND SEXUALITY AND GENDER IDENTITY

COUNSELLING AND PSYCHOLOGICAL SERVICES (CAPS)

THE UNIVERSITY OF SYDNEY
Sexual orientation is about who you’re attracted to, fall in love with and want to share romantic partnerships with. If you feel you don’t fit the regular heterosexual mainstream, you can explore and maybe discover a different sexual identity. Finding a sexual identity that feels right could give you an important sense of pride, confidence, and belonging. But the journey to get there can often be challenging.

For many people, at some point in their lives, there will be times when they question their sexual orientation. If that’s where you’re at this is perfectly okay and you’ve come to the right place. This ebook has been designed to give you some support and ideas that may help you begin finding your way through this process. We hope you find it helpful.
So, why do people’s sexual orientations differ? The truth is no one really knows for sure. Attempts to find a single cause haven’t been successful (e.g. genetics, childhood influences, peer pressure). It seems our sexual orientation, like many of our other characteristics, is most likely a product of our individual nature and experiences.

For many people, there will be times in their lives when they question their sexual orientation. If that’s you this is perfectly okay. Here are some ideas that may help you to think about this process.

Questioning your sexual orientation is a very normal part of discovering and accepting who you are. Just because you have questions it doesn’t necessarily mean that you must immediately (or ever) label yourself as ‘gay’, ‘lesbian’, ‘bisexual’, or even ‘straight’.

Gender identity is a person’s personal sense and subjective experience of their own gender. This is usually understood as a person’s internal or private sense of being male or female. Most people’s gender identity as male or female matches the their biological or birth-assigned sex. Some people’s internal sense of gender identity, or the way that they express gender, differs from their birth-assigned sex. Transgender is a term that is often used to describe this form of gender identity. Some, but not all, transgender people choose to alter their bodies hormonally or surgically so that their body is congruent with their innate gender. Some people are born with genetic, anatomical or hormonal variations that lead to their sex being ambiguous, and the term intersex is often used to describe them. Intersex people may identify as male, female, neither male nor female, or both male and female. Gender identity is different from sexual orientation.

Gender is an intrinsic part of who we are and how we see ourselves and other people. Given that gender is usually assumed to be unchangeable or fixed, other people can find it confronting when people explore different ways of expressing their gender, or change their gender. Many people whose gender identity differs from their birth-assigned sex experience emotional distress in relation to their gender identity or as a result of other people’s responses to their expression of their gender identity.

You don’t have to have all the answers this week, this month or this year. Take your time to explore and figure it out. Hearing about other people’s experiences can help to clarify things. So can getting some experiences of your own!

Try the following:

– Read the stories of other people’s journeys to understanding and accepting their sexual orientation, and other relevant literature
– Watch movies that provide honest, positive and hopeful representations of gay, lesbian and bisexual people and their lifestyles.
– Attend groups or events organised by local gay, lesbian and bisexual organisations.
– Get intimate with different people. Being gay, lesbian or bisexual isn’t all about sex. In fact, it’s more about who you bond with emotionally. Of course, it’s also okay to experiment with sexual partners who are the same sex as you – many people do at some stage. Just make sure you practice safe sex!
– Speak to a counsellor – this can provide you with the space to think about how to explore your sexual orientation, as well as address any challenges or distress that you may be struggling with along the way.

If you reach a point where you feel clear that your sexual orientation is non-heterosexual, you may begin thinking about telling the important people in your life. This process is often referred to as ‘coming out’. The next section offers some guidance on this process.
Always remember that you don’t have to come out and whether to come out or not should always be your choice. Some people choose to come out to some people and not to others. For example, they might be out to their friends but not their family, or vice versa.

Some people will be accepting of your news but others may not receive it so well, at least initially. For this reason it may be worth considering some key questions when you are thinking about coming out to someone.

Key questions to consider if you’re thinking about coming out:
– How sure are you about your sexual attractions and identity? It’s good to be prepared for common questions like ‘are you sure?’ and ‘how do you know?’. Being able to respond confidently to these questions may help you convey your news to others. Think also about why it’s important to you to tell this person, as they may ask you why you decided to.
– How comfortable are you in talking about your sexual orientation with other people? If you seem uncomfortable talking about your sexual orientation, others may think you’re not sure. If this is what you want to convey then that’s ok. However, if that’s not what you want to convey it might be a good idea to explore your ideas with a counsellor, and get some information about your sexuality to share with people.
– How comfortable are you with answering some questions the person might have? There are plenty of myths and stereotypes around. For these reasons, checking the reality can be a great preparation for answering people’s questions, and also a great way for you to increase your sense of pride in your identity. Check out some coming out stories, some positive films about sexuality and gender identity, and lists of same-sex attracted people from across the ages.
– How likely is it the person might reject you and how much support do you have? Take time to think about how the person has responded to information about same-sex attracted people in the past. Be prepared for a positive or negative reaction. Have some support available before and after you come out to that particular person (e.g. a friend, support group, counsellor).
– What will you do if the person takes it badly? Some people may just need a bit of time to process it, some may react in an overtly negative way. For example, they may ask you to leave home. It’s important to think about whether you are financially, physically or emotionally dependent on the person you want to tell. If you are dependent in any of these ways it’s important to have a back-up plan, e.g. think about who can support you if you can’t stay at home.
– How important to you is it that the person be told now? Timing is important. For example, if you’re near your end of semester exams you may decide to wait until afterwards, or until you have more support, income or housing options.
– Is it your decision or are you being forced? Remember, you do not have to come out, and the decision to come out should always be yours.
– Are the people you want to tell going to respect your privacy? It’s a good idea to think about what you want to tell the person about telling others. Is it ok for them to tell others or should they keep it to themselves? Consider whether you’re likely to have an argument with this person further down the track and whether they might tell people out of spite.

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If you’re having sex it’s wise to take care of your health. Even though sex education is taught in schools, it’s usually about hetero-, not homo-sex, so you may not be aware of all the facts. There are a lot of sexually transmissible infections (STIs) out there, so don’t be complacent – know about the risks you’re dealing with and how to stay safe.

For example, did you know that HIV infection rates in Australia have steadily risen since 1994, and are now at higher levels than ever before? Take a look at this factsheet about common STIs to find out more.

For men, using a condom is always sensible, but in gay sex, many condoms (like ultra thin, ribbed & novelty ones) are useless - they break with the extra friction involved in gay sex. Most gay venues will have good, free condoms at the bar though, which is handy. Don’t forget to use only water-based lubricant as well, as oils dissolve the rubber.

If you choose to have ‘bareback’ sex (without condoms), make sure you are aware of the risk. It can take 12 weeks for HIV to show on a blood test, and you don’t want to be ignorantly infecting yourself or other people. If you have unprotected sex, get yourself checked out.

For women, any sexual activity that can lead to bleeding or cuts in the lining of the vagina or anus is of higher risk. This includes penetration, fisting or certain S&M activities. Keep your nails short and cover hands with latex gloves.

Oral sex is low risk, but higher if you or your partner have any cold sores, cuts or abrasions on or in your mouth or genitals, or are having a period. Dental dams are squares of latex that can provide protection against such risks. Alternatively, cut a square of rubber out of a regular condom.

Remember, you don’t need to go to your GP for advice if you are concerned about them knowing about your sexuality - for example there is a completely confidential Sydney Sexual Health Centre at Sydney Hospital.

Harassment and bullying are not tolerated at the University. The University is committed to providing a study environment free from harassment and bullying on all its campuses and this commitment is set out in its harassment and discrimination prevention policies. If you feel you are being harassed or discriminated against you can:

– approach the person directly, point out to that person that you feel he or she is harassing or discriminating against you, and ask that person to stop.
– report the harassment or discrimination to a member of staff and ask him or her to take action to stop the harassment or discrimination.
– talk to one of the University’s Harassment and Discrimination Support Officers on a confidential basis about what is happening and the options available to you to deal with it.
– seek advice from the University’s Counselling and Psychological Services.
– Contact the Students’ Representative Council (for undergraduates) or SUPRA (for postgraduates) for support and advocacy to help you take appropriate action.
– Contact the police on 000 if you feel your safety may be at risk.
If you are gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, or questioning your sexuality, or gender identity, it can be a stressful, confusing, and sometimes lonely time. It's really important to be able to explore your identity and seek some support in the process of understanding and accepting yourself and "coming out" to the important people in your life. Below are some ideas of places and people that may be helpful to you:

University Counselling and Psychological Services
We offer different types of support that could be helpful if you are struggling with your mental health as a consequence of sexuality issues (e.g. anxiety, depression). These include making an appointment for short-term individual counselling and workshops. If you are struggling with other difficulties the Counselling Service will not assume that your sexuality is an issue. Services are free and available to all enrolled students. Counselling and Psychological Services also provides information and advice on a variety of topics in the other Learn to e-book series.

Twenty10
Provides a range of services for young people (under 26) who identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender including counselling, case management, help with accommodation, support groups, projects and family support.
45 Chippendale Street, Chippendale 2008
T 02 8594 9555 (support line)
T 02 8594 9550 (admin)
twenty10.org.au

ACON
Australia's largest organisation promoting gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender health and well-being. Large range of information and resources available.
9 Commonwealth Street
Surry Hills, NSW 2010
T 02 9206 2000
acon.org.au

The Gender Centre
Provides a range of services for the transgender and gender diverse community, including counselling, social events and workshops.
7 Bent St, Petersham 2049
T 02 9569 1176
gendercentre.org.au

OII Australia
Intersex Australia. Promotes human rights and bodily autonomy for intersex people, and provides information, education and peer support. oii.org.au

Queer Postgrads Network
Information, campaigns, and events for lesbian, gay, bisexual, intersex and transgendered post grad students, mature age students, and their families/friends.
E queer@supra.usyd.edu.au

Shades
A Sydney University student society aiming to facilitate social interaction between queer and non-queer students. Social events, networking, career and leadership events. shades.org.au

Gay and Lesbian Counselling Service
A volunteer-based community service providing free, anonymous and confidential telephone counselling, information and referral services and support groups for gay men, lesbians, bisexual and transgender people.
T 02 8594 9596 or T 1800 184 527 (daily 5:30pm - 9:30pm)
glcsnsw.org.au

Gay and Lesbian Legal Advice Service
Information and advice around legal issues/discrimination for gay, lesbian and transgendered people.
Inner City Legal Centre, 50-52 Darlinghurst Road, Kings Cross, NSW 2011
E Inner_City@clc.net.au
T 02 9332 1966

Lifeline
Free 24-hour counselling service available anywhere in Australia.
T 13 11 14

Sydney Sexual Health Centre
Confidential and comprehensive service. Offers screening, vaccination and management of sexually transmitted infections, as well as education and counselling. Free, Medicare card not required.
Level 3, Nightingale Wing, Sydney Hospital Macquarie Street, Sydney, NSW 2000
T 02 9382 7440

Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG)
Information, resources, support groups and counselling for parents and friends of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people.
pflagaustralia.org.au

Gay and Lesbian Counselling Service
A volunteer-based community service providing free, anonymous and confidential telephone counselling, information and referral services and support groups for gay men, lesbians, bisexual and transgender people.
T 02 8594 9596 or T 1800 184 527 (daily 5:30pm - 9:30pm)
glcsnsw.org.au

Metropolitan Community Church
A church for gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people.
T 02 9569 5122
mccsydney.org
USEFUL RESOURCES

Books for young gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender and intersex people.
Coming out stories
Positive films about sexuality and gender identity
List of same-sex attracted people from across the ages