

# QUESTIONS ABOUT SEXUAL ORIENTATION?



## What is sexual orientation?

Sexual orientation refers to the biological sex of the people to whom we are romantically, sexually, and/or emotionally attracted.

Men who are attracted to other men are called homosexual or “gay.” Women who are attracted to other women are called homosexual or “lesbians.” People who are attracted to members of the opposite sex – men attracted to women, women attracted to men – are called heterosexual or “straight.” People who are attracted to people of both sexes are called bisexual.

### CAN YOU CHOOSE YOUR SEXUAL ORIENTATION?

No. Your sexual orientation is not a choice. It is something that is discovered at a very young age. Your sexual orientation is not based on how you were raised, what activities you’re interested in, or who your friends or family members are. It cannot be changed by therapy, willpower, or having sex with someone of the same or opposite sex.

### HOW CAN YOU TELL IF SOMEONE IS HOMOSEXUAL OR HETEROSEXUAL?

You cannot identify people’s sexual orientation unless you ask them or they tell you. Homosexual, heterosexual, and bisexual people come from every kind of family background, from all religious and ethnic groups, and from every community and country.

### WHEN DO YOU KNOW IF YOU ARE GAY, LESBIAN, STRAIGHT, OR BISEXUAL?

People discover their sexual orientation at different ages. Most people discover their sexual orientation at a young age. However, most people do not act on their feelings of heterosexuality or homosexuality until their teen years. And many do not accept their sexual orientation until they are adults because of discrimination by others.

## What is “coming out”?

Coming out is a lifelong process during which gay, lesbian, or bisexual people accept for themselves and tell others about their sexual orientation. Heterosexual people do not “come out,” because our society assumes that people are straight unless they say that they are not. This assumption is called heterosexism. Just like racism, sexism, or any other prejudice, heterosexism is offensive and disrespectful.

Many gay, lesbian, and bisexual people find coming out to be an extremely positive experience. Many say they feel relieved when they are finally able to be honest with themselves, their friends, and their family members. However, coming out can also be a very frightening experience, since it is difficult to know how family and friends will react. Fortunately, most communities have agencies that support gay, lesbian, and bisexual people of all ages.

### WHAT IS HOMOPHOBIA?

Homophobia is an irrational fear of gay, lesbian, and bisexual people. As a result of this fear, homophobic people will often make fun of, discriminate against, and even hate gay, lesbian, and bisexual people. Some people are homophobic because they believe the myths and negative stereotypes that exist about homosexuality. Other people’s homophobia might be based on their religious or cultural beliefs and values. Homophobic people may act in a number of ways. They may avoid people who are gay or who they think might be gay. They might deny gay people jobs or apartments. In some cases, they might go so far as to attack gay, lesbian, and bisexual people with words or with physical violence – also known as “gay bashing.”

### WHAT IF I THINK I MIGHT BE GAY?

Your sexual orientation is a normal and natural part of who you are. But understanding your sexual orientation can be a difficult and confusing experience, whether you are a teenager or an adult. It is very common for teens to wonder whether they are gay, lesbian, bisexual, or heterosexual. It’s important to remember that having confusing feelings is a normal part of growing up.

If you have questions about or are struggling with sexual orientation issues, there are places where you can go for support. As with any personal issue, it can be helpful to speak with a trusted, knowledgeable friend, family member, teacher, or professional. Or, you can get in touch with one of the organizations listed below that helps people grappling with sexual orientation issues and supports gay, lesbian, bisexual, or questioning teens.

## Resources

**PARENTS AND FRIENDS OF LESBIANS AND GAYS (PFLAG)** 212-463-0629

**NYC GAY AND LESBIAN ANTI-VIOLENCE PROJECT** 212-714-1141

24-hour bilingual hotline

**HETRICK-MARTIN INSTITUTE** 212-674-2400

**LESBIAN, GAY, BISEXUAL, AND TRANSGENDER COMMUNITY CENTER**

Youth Enrichment Services program at 212-620-7310

**PLANNED PARENTHOOD OF NEW YORK CITY**

[www.ppnyc.org](http://www.ppnyc.org)

## For more information, contact:

**PLANNED PARENTHOOD OF NEW YORK CITY**

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