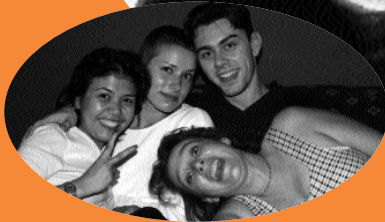


# gender and sexual identity

---

## THE JOURNEY begins




*If* you are reading  
this booklet it may be  
that you are attracted to  
someone of the same gender  
or have questions about  
your sexual orientation.  
Hopefully this booklet  
will answer some of  
your questions,  
calm some of  
your fears  
&  
help you  
understand  
that you are  
not alone.  
Confusion about  
your sexual orientation  
can sometimes lead  
you to take certain risks.  
This booklet may help you  
make smart decisions  
about risky behaviour,  
and therefore keep you  
healthy & safe.

Cover Photos:  
*main circle* by Carl Danker  
*smaller circle* by John  
Simone

## WHO AM I?

By asking yourself this question, you have started a journey. Like any journey, it will have its highs and lows. You will be scared and you will be excited. You will be lonely and you will find friendship. You will have fun and you will be sad. Finding your way to your destination will be only one of the challenges.

Throughout this journey you will have many questions and like many who have made this journey before, your questions may have started a long time ago. Some of these questions will be answered by this booklet and some will be answered by other people in other ways. ***Many of the best answers will come from inside yourself!***



For a long time you may have felt “different” than your friends or people in your family.

Recognizing that you felt different may have started as early as grade six or seven. It is around then that words like “fag” or “lezzie” are used as insults.

You may have been called those names and because you felt different, those names probably hurt and made you scared.


You might have felt angry because you didn’t want to be different. This name calling is often one of our first experiences with a prejudice called **Homophobia** and can create a fear and anger that can last our whole life.

In Canada, homophobia is against the law.

Being gay is not wrong, in fact it’s your right to be who and what you are.

What is wrong is when you feel you have to be something you’re not.





Many gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered youth have a sense of “differentness” very early in their lives.

In junior high school you may have had a funny feeling in the pit of your stomach when you were around certain friends of the same gender. These feelings can be very exciting but they can also be very scary. This can be a confusing time. You may be wondering who you can talk to. You need to remember two important things...

***YOU ARE NOT ALONE*** and

EVERY GAY, LESBIAN,  
TRANSGENDERED AND  
BISEXUAL PERSON HAS FELT  
THIS WAY AT SOME POINT



Photo by Carol Nicolls

## SO EXACTLY WHAT IS GENDER AND SEXUAL ORIENTATION?

We are all sexual beings.

Sexual orientation refers to the gender (or genders) of the people we have feelings of attraction and affection toward both emotionally and physically. This is an important part of our ***total self-identity***; how we see ourselves and how others see us. It is one of the most difficult parts of ourselves to talk about and understand. Also, understanding our sexual orientation can happen at any time during our lives.

Here are the words used to describe sexual orientation:

### ***To be...***

***Transgendered*** is an umbrella term, relating to how some individuals express their gender identity. For some it might mean changing their gender, perhaps surgically; for others, to dress in the clothing of the “opposite” gender; for some, to be free to express themselves as neither male or female; and, for others it means having been born with ambiguous genitalia.

***Heterosexual*** is to have feelings of affection and attraction, both emotionally and physically to people of the opposite gender. This is also called “being straight”.

***Homosexual*** is to have feelings of affection and attraction, both emotionally and physically to people of the same gender. Lots of people refer to this as “being queer”.

Here are some other terms you may have heard before:

***Lesbian*** is to be a woman who has feelings of affection and attraction, both emotionally and physically to women.

***Bisexual*** is to be a woman or a man and to have feelings of affection and attraction, both emotionally and physically to both men and women.

***Gay*** is to be a man who has feelings of affection and attraction, both emotionally and physically for other men.

***Two-Spirited people*** is a contemporary term more commonly used by Aboriginal people in reference to individuals who may be gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgendered. Historically for many indigenous cultures of North America, these individuals were believed to possess positive attributes, leadership skills, and spiritual powers. In a general way, this term honours and expresses the diversity of one’s sexual orientation and the source of one’s creation, which is the male and female body and spirit.

***“GAY” is also a term used by many people to describe anyone who is not heterosexual and is sometimes used throughout this booklet to be as inclusive as possible.***

## WHAT IF I'M NOT SURE WHAT MY SEXUAL ORIENTATION IS?

***You are the only person who can answer this question.*** There is no time limit on making a decision about your sexual orientation and you might still change your mind. Feelings of affection and attraction can be confusing. One day you can be sure that the emotional and physical attraction to someone of the same sex exists and then the next day you can be sure you were wrong. ***This is not unusual.***

You will be torn between others' expectations of you and your own feelings. Messages about who you should be come from family, friends, school, television, books, magazines, movies, church and society as a whole. While this is slowly changing, we all still live in a world where it is



Photo by Carol Nicolls

assumed that everyone is heterosexual.

Try reading some books or magazines with a gay theme. Look for TV programs and movies that deal with gay issues. These will

show you that you are not alone in your questions and provide you with important information.

You may try sharing your feelings with others. You could talk to a trusted family member, friend, counsellor, doctor, nurse, teacher or someone at a gay or youth community centre.

***Remember...no one can talk you into being something you're not!*** You will know if what you are doing feels right. ***Learn to trust your own feelings!***

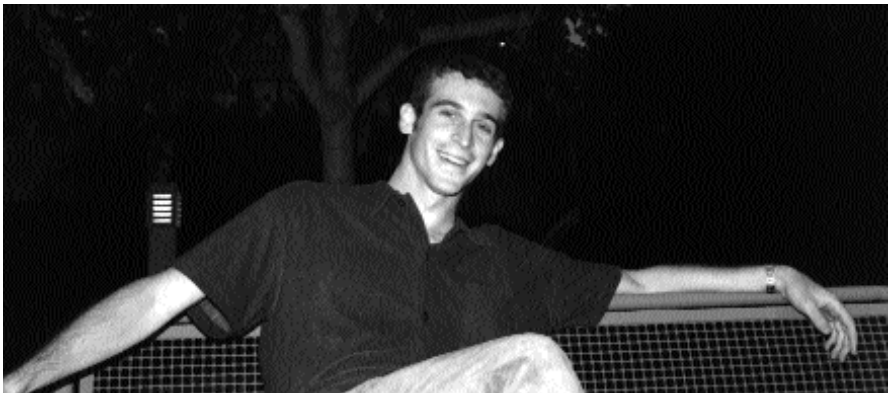


Photo by John Simone

## WHAT ABOUT RELATIONSHIPS?

This may be a time of experimentation for you. ***Exploration and experimentation does not determine sexual orientation***, it helps you discover your true feelings. Look out for your own safety and live up to your own expectations. ***Taking care of your physical and emotional well-being is the best thing you can do at this time in your life.*** The lessons you learn now will last your entire life.

Relationships are important for everyone. They are a key part of developing your sexual identity - ***no matter what that identity is.*** Some young people have discovered ways to be close with their dates or partners without having sex. Talking, spending time together, hugging, kissing, massaging and holding hands are all ways to share affection for someone you care about. Some people choose to meet their own sexual needs through masturbating and some people choose not to have sex at all. Delaying sex is always a choice you have.

## DO I HAVE TO BE "OUT" TO BE GAY?

*No.*

To be "out" means that you tell others about your sexual orientation. There are many things that need to be in place before someone is ready to be out. Also, some people never fully "come out" and when they do, they may only come out to a few very close friends or family members.

If you are experiencing feelings of guilt, anger or fear, then this may not be the time to come out. However, it may be a good time to talk to someone on a gay, or youth "help" phone-line. These phone-lines are a way to get answers without having to let anyone know who you are.

***Safety is a key issue when telling someone that you are gay.*** You need to ensure your safety above all else. Food, shelter and physical safety are critical. Do not do anything that will jeopardize any of these!

## DO I HAVE TO HAVE SEX TO KNOW IF I'M GAY?

### *No!*

Having sex before you are ready is likely to cause confusion. Many kinds of pressure can create situations where you have sex and experiment before you are ready. You don't need to be sexually active to have a sexual identity. As you learn more about yourself, you may move on to identify yourself as gay.

***Being gay, just like being straight is not only about having sex.*** Being gay is also about attraction, affection, how you see yourself and the gender of the person you see yourself with. It is about relationships, families, community and friendship.

The challenge is to make sure YOU are ready when YOU have sex.

***YOU always have a choice.***

## WHAT ABOUT HIV/AIDS?



Sooner or later you're going to meet someone you want to have sex with. Being unsure about your sexual identity or being unable to disclose it to people around you increases your risk of becoming infected with HIV. Before you have sex there are a few things you need to know.

Don't let feelings of loneliness or fear pressure you into putting yourself at risk of being infected

with HIV. ***Learn everything you can about***

***HIV and safer sex.*** Safer sex is protecting yourself from HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases (STD's). The HIV virus is spread when blood, semen or vaginal fluids from an infected person get into your bloodstream. This can happen through skin cuts, mouth sores, or invisible scratches on the penis or in the vagina or anus. Unsafe and unprotected sex (including oral and anal or vaginal intercourse) or the sharing of injection drug needles are ways to put yourself at risk for becoming infected with HIV and with STDs. Latex condoms and dental dams, used consistently and correctly, will help prevent the transmission of HIV and STDs.

When using a latex condom during sexual intercourse, remember to use lots of waterbase lubricants like KY or astroglide. If there is not enough lubricant, sex can hurt and there is a good chance the condom might tear! Don't use oily lubricants such as Vaseline, baby oil or hand lotion. These weaken the latex and the condom will break.

The good news about HIV transmission is that you **can't get HIV from kissing or touching**. Oral sex carries a low risk of HIV transmission except if there are sores in your mouth or throat. Out of the hundreds of thousands of HIV infection cases, very few are thought to come from oral sex. Oral sex carries a much higher risk of transmission when it comes to other STD's.

Risk factors for transmission of STD's like Syphilis, Gonorrhoea, Chlamydia, Genital Warts, Herpes and Hepatitis are very different than HIV. Ask your family doctor, school health nurse or local STD clinic for more information. **Information is available in books at the library, on the web or in pamphlets that you pick up at clinics, youth centres, drug stores and maybe even your school.**

Sex can be a wonderful thing but you still need to know the facts. It is important to remember that you continue practicing safer sex even after you meet someone you want to start a relationship with. They may be the person of your dreams but that's no guarantee they haven't been exposed to HIV or other STD's in the past. It is good to love people but **don't forget to respect yourself!**




## HOW DO I TELL MY PARENTS?

***Timing is important but safety is CRITICAL.***

Parents come in all shapes, sizes and mind-sets. Some have strong opinions and will not tolerate any argument or difference. Others pride themselves on being reasonable and understanding. They can be a combination of the two depending on the topic.

From years of being around, talking with and listening to your parents, you can be reasonably sure of where they stand on issues such as homosexuality and how they will react to a gay person. Before you make the decision to tell your parents, there are a number of questions to consider;

- ***How comfortable are you with your sexual identity?***
- ***How has your family dealt with political, religious, cultural and social issues in the past?***
- ***How close are you to your parents?***
- ***Are you economically and emotionally dependent on your parents?***
- ***How safe are you in your home?***
- ***Do you have a support system for yourself?***
- ***How much information do you have and are you able to share it with your parents?***



Try to answer these questions as honestly as possible, and remember - it is important to look at your parents as objectively as you can before you make the decision to talk to them.

Other things may be happening in your parents lives which may make coming out or discussing sexual identity with them difficult. Over dinner, during the holidays, family gatherings or just before going off to college or university may not be the right time. These may also be the perfect times - ***only you will know for sure.***

Some people have found a more indirect way works best. For example, talking to a sibling or supportive aunt or uncle first and having them help you talk to your parents. Another way is to write what you want to say in a letter and give it to one of your parents to read while you sit and observe. Again, be ready to answer lots of questions.

There are PFLAG (Parents, Families & Friends of Lesbians & Gays) groups in most major centres. This is a valuable place for both you and your parents to find support.

## HOW DO I TELL FRIENDS AND PEERS?

Sometimes it is easier and less threatening to come out or discuss your sexual orientation with a friend. Using common sense about who you tell, when and how you tell them is critical. Your friends may be less judgmental and more supportive than family. They can also be very insensitive jerks. They may feel threatened by talking about sexual identity.

Anyone you choose

to tell should be someone you have shared secrets with before. They should have a good track

record of keeping them! Pick a trustworthy friend who understands the importance of your privacy and values your safety and well-being. It should also be someone who does not talk badly about or who makes cruel remarks about lesbians, gays and bisexuals.

**Pick**  
**a trustworthy friend**  
**who underst**

Use your own common sense when deciding when and where to tell your friends. The middle of a cafeteria or a movie theatre may not be the best place.

**values your safety**

**&**

**well-being.**

Pick some place where you have talked about sensitive things in

the past and have the conversation there.

Practice the words you will use in a mirror and do it only when you feel ready.

Telling a friend in an open and direct way is best.

***For example:***

***“Josh, there is something I want you to know about me. I know this may freak you out but I hope you will be okay with it. I need to trust that you won’t tell anyone. You’re my best friend and I want you to know I am gay.”***

You have no way of guessing the exact response your friend will have. If telling other people doesn’t work out the way you

***ands the importance of***

wanted or planned - ***don’t despair***. Telling others, like self acceptance, is a part of the journey. It can give you support when

***your privacy and***

you need it and answer questions you have about yourself - it can even give you a whole new set of questions and issues to consider.

Many local AIDS and youth organizations offer safe and confidential places - they may be an ideal place for you to meet other gay, lesbian and bisexual youth.



## WHAT WILL MY FAMILY AND FRIENDS SAY?

Everyone needs someone they can talk to and finding someone to talk to about who you are is important. However, when you tell other people you are gay, they often go through a variety of reactions. ***These may include one of the following:***

***Shock:***

*They won't say anything.*

***Acceptance:***

*"As long as you're happy, we love you no matter who you are."*

***Denial:***

*"No, I don't believe it." or "Don't you just think this is just a phase you are going through?"*

***Understanding:***

*"This must have been very difficult for you, we are proud of you for the courage it must have taken to deal with such an important issue."*

***Anger:***

*"Do you know what this is going to do to your (mother, father, sister, brother, etc)?" or "Don't think for a minute you are going to be gay and live under my roof!"*

### **Grief:**

*“You’ll never be happy.” or “You’ll never have children.”*

### **Curiosity:**

*“When did you first think you might be gay?”,  
“Have you spoken with or told anyone else?”,  
“Has anyone been unkind when you’ve told them?”*

### **Guilt:**

*“What did I do wrong?” or “What did I do to deserve this?”*

### **Bargaining:**

*“If you don’t act on them, the feelings will go away.” or “I know this nice girl/boy, won’t you just call them?”*

Some of these responses make it easier to talk about who you are, and others don’t. That is why it is important for you to feel secure with your identity before you come out to others. **You may want a support system in place before you talk to others.** A support system can be a counsellor or therapist, a teacher or member of the clergy or a close friend or family member.

You can also seek support from a youth, AIDS or gay community group in your area. Most centres have counselling services and support groups for young people dealing with coming out. They can also refer you to professionals or other groups in your community. All groups and services are confidential and you should not even have to use your real name if you don’t want to.

**Don’t worry...** walking into a gay support group or community youth centre does not commit you to being gay. Many also offer support groups and counselling for parents.



Photo by Brian Huskins

## HOW DO I GET MORE INFORMATION?

There are many resources in your community. They vary from support groups, peer education, social groups, news publications, gay and lesbian centres to school groups and professionals. Many businesses are “gay friendly” or cater to a gay clientele. The tough part is to link in with some of these. A good place to start is a local gay or youth community group. If one doesn’t exist in your community, one may exist in a community close by.



## WHERE CAN I GET MORE INFORMATION?

There are many books available on being gay and learning to accept your sexual orientation. A few books are...

***The New Loving Someone Gay*** by Don Clark  
***free your mind*** by Ellen Bass and Kate Kaufman  
***Is It A Choice?*** by Eric Marcus  
***Two-Spirited People, Native American Gender Identity, Sexuality and Spirituality*** by Sue-Ellen Jacobs, Wesley Thomas and Sabine Lang

Some magazines are...

***Out***  
***The Advocate***  
***Ten Percent***

Throughout Canada, there are a number of regional gay newspapers and magazines. Your local phone-line can give you the names of those available in your community and where you can get them.

If you have access to the InterNet, there are many sites you can visit for information. Like anything on the Net, don't give out your name and address or use it as a way to set up "in person" meetings! The key words for your search can include:

***(Transgendered, Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual or Queer) Youth Sexual Orientation Coming Out***



## A FINAL WORD...

This booklet contains just a bit of information you will need. You have a lot to look forward to. Explore your feelings, talk about them, seek support from friends and family and meet new people.

Being the person you really are can be great! If you are gay - don't waste your life wishing you were someone else. ***Be proud of what you are and who you are.*** Go out and meet new friends and whatever you do, do it safely!



## Special Note :

*The original version of this pamphlet was designed and produced by the Calgary Regional Health Association.*

Production coordinated by:  
**Prevention and Community Action Programs**  
**Canadian Strategy on HIV/AIDS, Health Canada**

## Special Thanks :

### Photography:

Brian Huskins  
Carl Danker  
John Simone  
Carol Nicolls  
and  
Health Canada Photo Library

### Editorial:

Brian Huskins (Calgary)

### Youth Focus Groups:

Calgary, Kamloops, Windsor, Winnipeg and Halifax

May 1998



## Community Resources

For information on Sexually Transmitted Diseases, HIV/AIDS, or testing, contact:

Local Health Clinics  
Community Health Nurses  
School Guidance Counsellors  
or look for the Communicable Disease or STD Clinic  
in your local phone book

*You can also reach the Canadian AIDS Society  
free of charge by calling 1-800-884-1058.*

*Ask for the number of the closest AIDS Service Organization.*

For more information from the Internet contact Health  
Canada's HIV/AIDS website at:

[www.hc-sc.gc.ca/hiv\\_aids](http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/hiv_aids)

or the National Native American AIDS Prevention Centre at:

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

Additional copies available from:

National AIDS Clearinghouse  
(613) 725-3434  
[aidssida@cpha.ca](mailto:aidssida@cpha.ca)

For more local information contact: