Sexuality explained

Summary

- Sexuality is diverse, and there are many different types. It can take time to figure out the sexuality that fits you best. And your sexuality can change over time.
- Some people have a hard time accepting others who are different. They might discriminate against them, bully them, or even be violent.
- Discrimination is illegal. If someone gives you a hard time about your sexuality, it’s good to talk to someone about it. You don’t need to deal with it by yourself.
- Sexuality is an important part of who we are. There is no right or wrong, it’s about what’s right for you.

Sexuality is not about whom we have sex with, or how often we have it. Sexuality is about our sexual feelings, thoughts, attractions and behaviours towards other people. We can find other people physically, sexually or emotionally attractive, and all those things are a part of our sexuality.

Sexuality is diverse and personal, and it is an important part of who we are. Some people experience discrimination due to their sexuality. If someone gives you a hard time about your sexuality, it’s good to talk to someone about it.

Different types of sexuality

Sometimes, it can take time to figure out the sexuality that fits you best. And your sexuality can change over time. It can be confusing; so don’t worry if you are unsure.

You might be drawn to men or to women, to both or to neither. There is no right or wrong – it’s about what’s right for you. And while there are common terms to describe different types of sexuality, you don’t have to adopt a label to describe yourself.

Heterosexual and homosexual

Most people are attracted to the opposite sex – boys who like girls, and women who like men, for example. These people are heterosexual, or ‘straight’.

Some people are attracted to the same sex. These people are homosexual. Around 10 per cent of young Australians experience same-sex attraction, most during puberty.

‘Lesbian’ is the common term for female homosexuals. And ‘gay’ is the most common term for male homosexuals, although female homosexuals also use this word.

The Better Health Channel has more information on [lesbian sexuality](#) and [gay male sexuality](#).

Bisexual

Sexuality can be more complicated than being straight or gay. Some people are attracted to both men and women, and are known as bisexual.

Bisexual does not mean the attraction is evenly weighted – a person may have stronger feelings for one gender than another. And this can vary depending on who they meet.

There are different kinds of bisexuality. Some people who are attracted to men and women still consider themselves to be mainly straight or gay. Or they might have sexual feelings towards both genders but only have intercourse with one.
Other people see sexual attraction as more grey than black and white. These people find everyday labels too rigid. Some prefer to identify as ‘queer’. And others use the term ‘pan’, or ‘pansexual’, to show they are attracted to different kinds of people no matter what their gender, identity or expression.

There are many differences between individuals, so bisexuality is a general term only. You can read more about it at the Better Health Channel’s page on bisexuality.

**Asexual**

An asexual person (‘ace’ for short) is someone who does not experience sexual attraction.

Asexuality is not the same as celibacy and it is not about abstinence. It is not a gender identity or a hormone imbalance. It is also not a disorder or a fear of sex or relationships.

Asexuality is not a choice. It is a sexual orientation, like homosexuality or heterosexuality. Dating, having sex, experiencing orgasm, masturbating, falling in love, getting married, or having children do not conflict with asexuality.

Some people may strongly identify with being asexual, except for a few infrequent experiences of sexual attraction. Gray-asexuality and demisexuality are examples that fall within the asexual spectrum.

Gray-asexual people are in between asexual and non-asexual people. Some rarely experience sexual attraction. Others are unsure if they’ve experienced it, or feel they don’t quite fit the definition of asexual in some way.

Demisexual people feel sexual attraction only after they develop a strong emotional bond with someone.

**Transgender**

The terms transgender and transsexual are often interchanged, but some people argue there is a difference.

According to Youth Central a transgender person identifies with the opposite gender. They may not have started changing gender yet, but they prefer to be identified as the opposite sex and may use clothing or makeup to appear as their desired sex.

A transsexual person is one who has started changing (or transitioning) to their desired gender by using surgery, hormones or both. The process of physical change can take several years.

Transgender people can be MTF (male-to-female) or FTM (female-to-male). After their change, they may think of themselves as heterosexual, gay, lesbian, bisexual or another sexual identity.

Better Health Channel has more information on transgender and transsexuality.

**Intersex**

Intersex is a condition where a person is born with reproductive organs, genitalia or sex chromosomes that are not just male or female. The previous term for intersex was hermaphrodite.

Some intersex people identify as both male and female, and others as neither. Some undergo surgery to make them either male or female.

Better Health Channel has more information on intersex.

**Discrimination based on sexuality**

Equality and freedom from discrimination are fundamental human rights that belong to all people.

In most states in Australia, including Victoria, it is against the law to discriminate against someone because of their sexual orientation, gender identity or lawful sexual activity. However, discrimination can still occur.

Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTI) people can experience discrimination, harassment and hostility in many areas of life. They are twice as likely to be victims of abuse and violence as heterosexuals. And many modify their activities due to fear of stigma or discrimination.

Discrimination can happen at clubs, schools and shops, or in the workplace. It can include verbal abuse, social exclusion, receiving lesser treatment, physical threats, violence, being forced to disclose private information, and being sacked or missing out on employment opportunities because of your sexual identification.
Transgender and intersex people can also face barriers getting legal recognition of their sex in official documents and government records.

Better Health Channel has more information about gay and lesbian discrimination. And for information on the legal obligations of employers regarding discrimination based on sexual identity, see the Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission webpage, which has a list of equal opportunity practice guidelines.

If you think you have been discriminated against, sexually harassed, victimised or vilified, contact the Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission.

Sexuality and mental health

LGBTI people have an increased risk of depression, anxiety, substance abuse, homelessness, self-harming and suicidal thoughts, compared with heterosexual people. This is particularly true of young LGBTI people who have been victimised and bullied at school.

Some of the stressful experiences that can affect the mental health of a LGBTI person are:

- feeling different from other people
- being bullied (verbally or physically)
- feeling pressure to deny or change their sexuality
- feeling worried about coming out, and then being rejected or isolated
- feeling unsupported or misunderstood.

And these pressures are on top of all the other stuff people have to deal with in life such as managing school, finding a job, forming relationships and making sense of your identity and place in the world.

Helping someone struggling with their sexuality and mental health

If you are worried that someone you know has a mental health problem, look out for changes in their mood, behaviour, relationships, appetite, sleep patterns, coping and thinking. If these changes last more than a couple of weeks, talk to them about getting help. A good place to start is their doctor, or a phone or online service such as beyondblue or eheadspace (for young people).

If you are the one who is struggling with your sexuality, there are some steps that you can take:

- Get support if you’re finding it hard to cope. Try talking to someone you trust – a friend, relative, doctor or counsellor, or use a helpline.
- Don’t hang around someone if they are abusive to you.
- If you think you’re gay, it’s okay if you don’t want to come out. If you want, you can read more about coming out [http://au.reachout.com/coming-out].
- There is no rush to figure out your sexuality. Take your time. And don’t feel pressured to put a label on it.

Remember…

Sexuality is diverse, and there are many different types. It can take time to figure out the sexuality that fits you best. And your sexuality can change over time.

Some people have a hard time accepting others who are different. They might discriminate against them, bully them, or even be violent. Discrimination is illegal. If someone gives you a hard time about your sexuality, it’s good to talk to someone about it. You don’t need to deal with it by yourself. Sexuality is an important part of who we are. There is no right or wrong, it’s about what’s right for you.

Where to get help

For information about your rights:

- Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission

If you want to talk to someone, chat online, or find out more about LGBTI issues:

- QLife (counselling and referral service for LGBTI people) – Tel. 1800 184 527

betterhealth.vic.gov.au
- **headspace** (mental health service for ages 12–25) – Tel. 1800 650 890
- **ReachOut** (youth mental health service)
- **beyondblue** (for anyone feeling depressed or anxious) – Tel. 1300 22 4636, and **Youthbeyondblue**
- **Lifeline** (support for anyone having a personal crisis) – Tel. 13 11 14
- **Kids Helpline** Tel. 1800 55 1800
- **Switchboard** Tel. 1800 184 527 (telephone counselling, information and referrals)
- **Suicide Call Back Service** Tel. 1300 659 467 (for anyone thinking about suicide)
- You may also be interested in visiting these sites:
  - **ACON** (for LGBTI health and HIV prevention and support)
  - **PFLAG Victoria** (Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays)

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