



coming out



A coming out guide for
lesbian, gay and bisexual
young people

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intro

Even though there are many more out lesbian, gay and bisexual people in today's society, most of us still grow up in a world where being straight or heterosexual is seen as the norm. Whether it's a family member asking us if we have a girlfriend or boyfriend, or a friend expecting us to like someone off the TV, people often make assumptions that just because you are male or female you will be attracted to certain people and you will look, behave and feel a certain way.

In reality, though, the way we look, act and feel varies hugely, including to whom we are attracted. Very rarely are we told that being attracted to people of the same gender or to both genders is also perfectly normal for many, many people.

This guide has been written by lesbian, gay and bisexual young people, who have drawn on their own personal experiences to make the process of coming out as lesbian, gay or bisexual easier for others. Whether you are certain that you are lesbian, gay or bisexual, or are still unsure about your sexual orientation, this guide is written to help you understand your own feelings and how to share them with others when you feel ready.

Coming out is different for everyone, and although we hope this guide will help with that process, it won't provide you with a definitive answer to all your questions or tell you the *right* way to do it. What it will hopefully do is give you some useful tips, highlight other people's experiences and provide useful links to further information and support.



green light

LGBT Youth Scotland's Green Light Project is a national programme to support lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender young people to come out. Funded by the Big Lottery, the project involves working with young people from across Scotland to develop materials that challenge stigma, provide information, and offer advice around coming out.

By drawing on personal experiences, the project's participants are developing a range of resources to increase people's understanding of the many issues faced by LGBT young people, including peer education workshops, coming out guides, and college and university LGBT society toolkits.

For more information visit: www.lgbtyouth.org.uk/green-light.htm

LGBT Youth Scotland

LGBT Youth Scotland is a national youth organisation working towards the inclusion of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender young people in the life of Scotland. We provide a range of services and opportunities for young people, families and professionals.

LGBT Youth Scotland runs youth groups, provides online information and advice, provides one to one support, delivers training, carries out schools work, and offers volunteering opportunities for adults and young people.

To find out more, contact us:

Website: www.lgbtyouth.org.uk

Email: info@lgbtyouth.org.uk

Text: 07781 481 788



**what is
coming out?**

Coming out is when someone tells someone else their sexual orientation. Most of us are brought up to think that everyone is attracted to the opposite sex. For people who this is the case, they very rarely need to come out, as who they are attracted to matches what is seen as *normal*. These people may not even consider themselves to have a sexual orientation because it's not labelled as *different*.

Lesbian, gay and bisexual people, however, have to make the choice to either publicly *hide* how they feel or tell people they are attracted to people of the same gender or both genders. Lesbian, gay and bisexual people come out at all stages of their life and to varying degrees. For some it will be essential for them to live fully as themselves, whereas for others it might be that they only come out to themselves.

The following sections in this guide will look at all the different stages of the coming out process in more detail. Just remember that coming out is your choice and you should never feel forced to tell people if you don't feel ready. Coming out can be a lifelong process and only you can know when, where and who to tell.

Support & Advice

Once you have come out to yourself, you might want to tell people close to you straight away, but for many people this takes time. Before telling friends and family there are a number of ways you can get support to make this easier. Below are a few ideas.

1. Websites

There are now a number of websites for LGBT people that offer information and advice (see Websites on page 40).

2. Online Forums

If you don't feel ready to talk to other people face to face, there are a number of online forums where you can talk to other lesbian, gay and bisexual people. This can be a safe and anonymous way to find out more and discuss how you are feeling. See www.lgbtyouth.org.uk/forum.

3. Support Groups

There are a number of youth groups where you can meet other lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender young people in a safe and confidential environment. For a list of LGBT youth groups in Scotland see: www.lgbtyouth.org.uk/get-involved.htm.

Things to Think About

Coming out to others can be a hugely liberating experience and many people say it feels like a huge weight has been lifted from them. Below is a list of some of these benefits as well as some things to consider.

Benefits

- Being yourself
- Unloading the burden
- Living as you want to live
- Meeting other lesbian, gay and bisexual people
- Helping/supporting other lesbian, gay and bisexual people
- Gradually feeling at ease with yourself
- Educating others/breaking down stereotypes/myths
- Being a positive role model for others

Considerations

- Homophobia
- Safety
- Negative reactions
- Being rejected
- People not taking it seriously
- Some people might treat you differently
- People not listening/understanding (ignorance)
- People trying to talk you out of it

Coming out rarely is all good or all bad, but if you do have a negative experience, remember that by coming out you will have increased opportunities to meet other LGBT people, make new friends, and receive support from others.

Coming Out Step by Step

Telling someone that you are close to can be the hardest part of coming out, so it's important to be prepared. There's never really a *proper* time or place and you'll probably never feel 100% ready, but this step by step guide will help you to have all bases covered.

Be sure you are ready to tell:

- Be confident in yourself.
- Be sure that you want to come out rather than feeling you have to.

Be informed yourself – be prepared to answer questions:

- Educate yourself on the topic so you can educate others.
- If you are well informed you're more likely to be taken seriously.

Get support

- See the Support & Advice section, page 8.

Think about who, where, when:

- Be sure about whom you want to tell and that they are someone you trust.
- Do it somewhere neutral and safe (somewhere neither of you know others).
- Make sure there is plenty of time to talk.

Decide how you are going to word it:

- Don't be too scripted or formal.
- Don't provide too much information at once.
- Try and be calm.
- Be non-confrontational.

Be ready for reactions:

- Be prepared for any reaction (see Questions & Responses page 12).
- Remember that this might be the first time they have thought of you this way/met an out lesbian, gay or bisexual person.
- Their first reaction might not be how they actually feel.
- Give people a chance to think and time to get used to it. Remember that it probably took time for you to come to terms with it.



questions + responses

Depending on who's being asked and who's asking, answers will vary, but the questions and guide answers below will hopefully help you to prepare for some of the common questions and reactions when someone comes out as lesbian, gay or bisexual.

Q: How do you know/are you sure?

A: Like everyone else, lesbian, gay and bisexual people know who they are attracted to; it's not any different.

Q: What does that mean?

A: Gay – emotionally and physically attracted to men.

Lesbian – emotionally and physically attracted to women.

Bisexual – emotionally and physically attracted to both women and men.

Q: Does that mean you'll never have children?

A: There are lots of ways to have children as a lesbian, gay or bisexual person, if I decide I want to be a parent

Q: It's a difficult life to lead.

A: Lots of lesbian, gay and bisexual people lead full and happy lives.

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Q: Don't tell anyone.

A: It's my decision to tell people if I want to and I would like you to support me with whatever decision I make.

Q: It's against my/your religion.

A: There are many lesbian, gay and bisexual people who are religious and many places of worship are welcoming to them. If your religion or place of worship doesn't accept LGB people, you can still have your own relationship with your god, and no-one has the right to tell you otherwise.

Q: I don't want to know you anymore.

A: Some people may never accept it, but many do with time. Give these people some space or ask a supportive friend to talk to them. Just because I am attracted to people of the same gender or people of both genders doesn't change me as a person.

Q: It's probably just a phase.

A: I've thought about it for a long while before telling you and I know how I feel.

Q: I feel like I don't know you anymore.

A: I'm still the same person, and because I am close to you I didn't want there to be any secrets between us.

Q: You don't look gay.

A: Lesbian, gay and bisexual people look, dress and act in many different ways, just like straight people.

Q: How do people have sex with someone who is the same gender as them?

A: This is a personal question, which you should only answer if you feel comfortable doing so. Lesbian, gay and bisexual people have sex in different ways (just like straight people). See Relationships, page 24, for more information.

If anyone you come out to reacts negatively try and find a safe way to remove yourself from the situation. If their response involved verbal or physical abuse, you may want to report this to the police. See Reporting a Hate Crime, page 27, for more information.



coming out

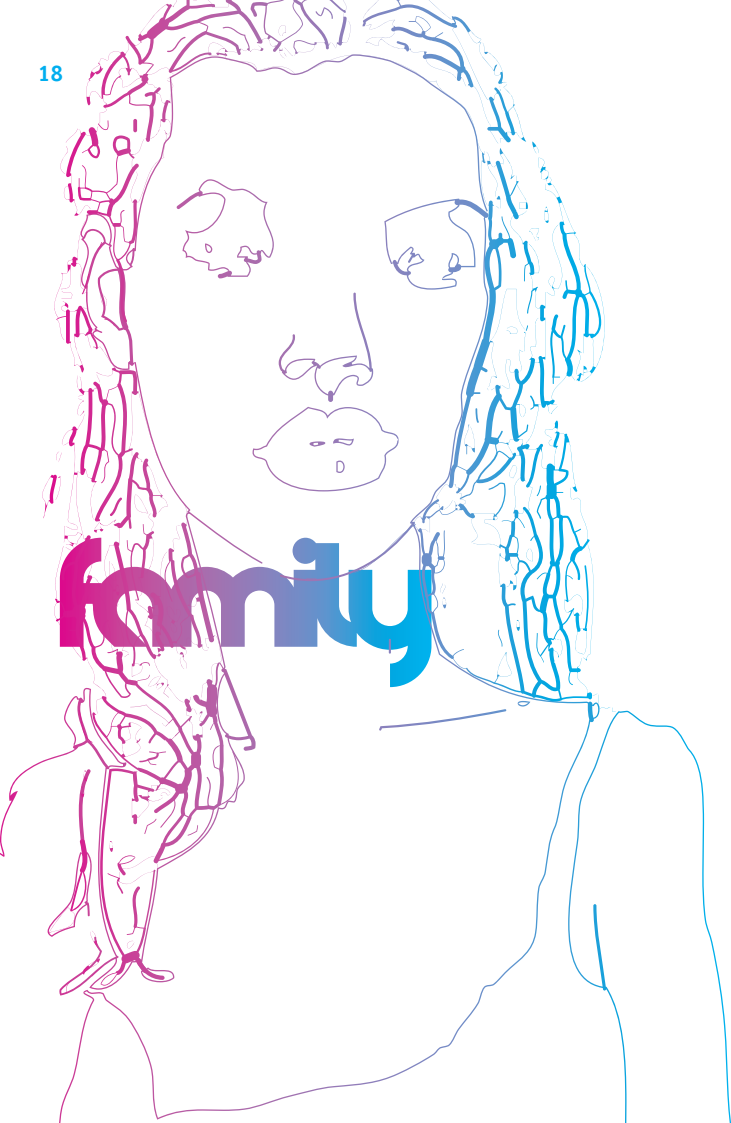
Coming Out to Friends

Many lesbian, gay and bisexual people come out because they reach a point where they don't want to hide who they are anymore. Telling friends can provide extra support and can make relationships feel more honest and real. Some friends may not accept it, but real friends will accept you for who you are.

Before coming out to a friend, have a think about the following:

- Decide who you want to tell
- Decide who you can trust not to tell others (unless you want them to).
- It is important when telling a friend to explain that it is your choice to tell others in your own time.
- Be prepared for questions and to explain how you feel.
- Make sure you are in a safe, neutral space.
- Be confident about your decision and don't let others try and talk you out of it.
- Remind them that who you are attracted to is only one part of you and that you are still the same person.
- Explain that your friendship doesn't necessarily have to change.

Coming out may change some friendships – sometimes you might end up being closer, but sometimes people might become awkward around you. The important thing is to explain you are still the same person. If they don't accept it be patient and give them some space, as they may need time to get used to it.



family

Coming Out to Family

Telling family members can feel especially daunting because they have known you your whole life. The news may come as a surprise and they may think that they are somehow to blame. It's important to help them understand that this is a part of you that no-one can change.

- Think about what family member to tell first; who you think might be most supportive.
- Some parents or carers, may blame themselves, or think that they did something wrong. Try and reassure them that this is a part of you that no-one can change, and that it has nothing to do with them *getting it wrong*.
- If they are worried about you not having children, explain there are many options if you want to be a parent.
- Be ready to have a conversation about it with them and be ready to answer questions.
- Remember that the first reactions you get from family members may not be a true representation of how they'll feel in the long term.
- Many parents, with time, can become your biggest advocate.

Coming Out at School

Some lesbian, gay and bisexual people will go through school without telling anyone their sexual orientation, but some may decide to come out at school. For others being *outed* or being presumed to be lesbian, gay or bisexual will also be a reality.

Some things to consider are:

- Speaking to your guidance teacher or the head teacher to discuss how the school will support you.
- Ask for a copy of the school's anti-bullying policy to see if it mentions homophobia.
- Get further advice from LGBT youth groups or online resources.
- If your friends will support you to come out at school.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child states that every person under the age of 18 should have the right to education, the right to be kept safe from harm, and the right to have a say in the decisions affecting their own life. It is your school's responsibility to make sure that you are safe from bullying and discrimination, but if your school are failing to support you properly, you may want to report it to the police. See Rights & Legislation, page 30, and Reporting a Hate Crime, page 27, for more information.

Coming Out at College/Uni

A lot of lesbian, gay and bisexual people see going to college or university as an opportunity to live more openly and be more public about their sexual orientation. Of course people's experiences vary greatly depending upon where they study, what subjects they pick and their classmates.

Before enrolling for a course at a college or university, it might be useful to consider the following:

- Check if they have an LGBT society.
- Read the college/university's mission statement to see if it mentions equality and diversity
- Ask for a copy of the college/university's anti-bullying policy

All Scottish colleges and universities are required by law to deal with any discrimination you face as a lesbian, gay or bisexual student, but for them to deal with it you must report it. This is not always easy to do, so perhaps ask a friend to come with you for support.

Coming Out at Work

Whether you come out at work or not is completely up to you. Some lesbian, gay and bisexual people feel more comfortable coming out at work, so they can be honest about who they are, and avoid people making assumptions. For others, they see their sexual orientation as a private matter and not the business of anyone at work.

If you do decide to come out at work, it is worth considering the following:

- Think about who to tell.
- Is there anyone you work with who you wouldn't want to know?
- Are people likely to gossip about it?
- Would other work colleagues support you if some reacted badly to it?

Being discriminated at work because of your sexual orientation has been against the law since 2003. If you think you are being discriminated at work because of your sexual orientation you should seek advice. For more information see Rights & Legislation.

Coming Out on the Scene

Many cities and larger towns will have some sort of gay scene, whether it is a collection of pubs and clubs specifically for LGBT people or simply a *straight* pub that is LGBT friendly. For many people when they come out, going to a gay bar, club or café is an important way to make new friends, meet partners, feel accepted or feel part of an LGBT community. Although there can be many positive aspects to going out on the gay scene, it can also be daunting going along for the first time. Below are a few pointers to make sure you feel comfortable and keep yourself safe, if you do decide to go along:

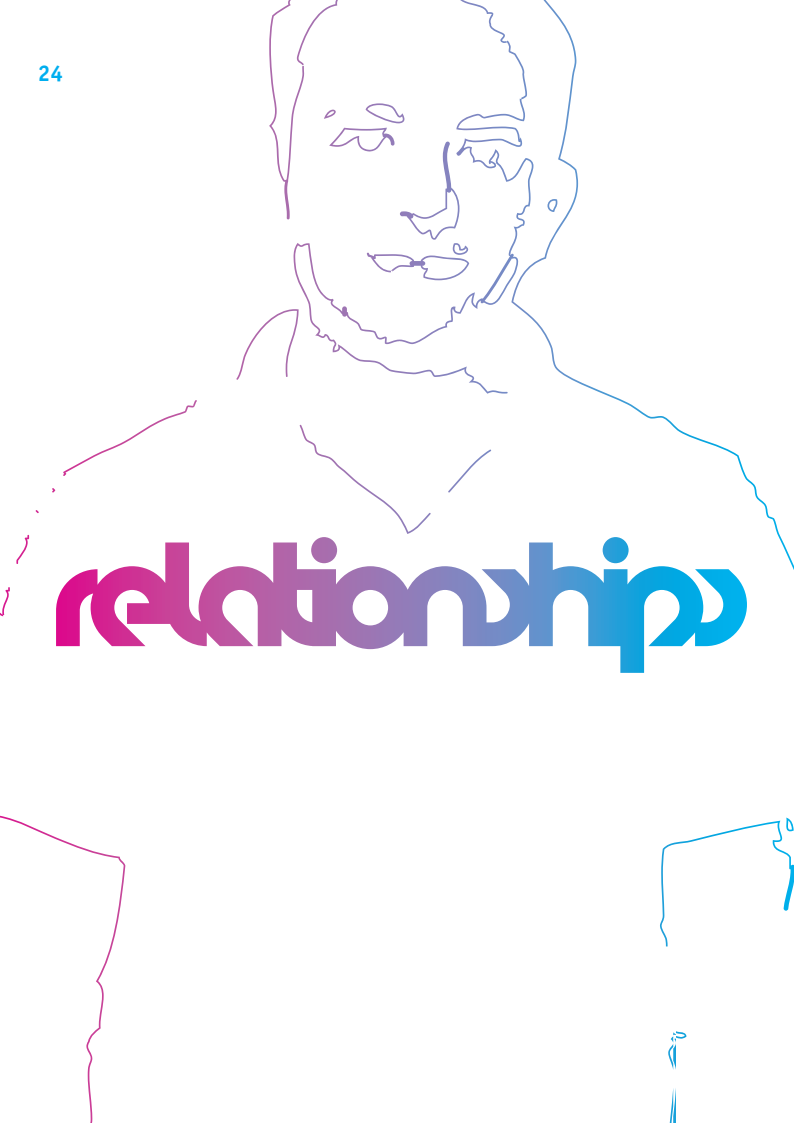
General Safety

- Always go with a friend or group of friends – that way you can look out for each other.
- Keep money aside for a taxi home.
- Make sure your mobile phone is charged.
- Keep an eye on your drink and don't accept drinks from strangers.

Meeting others on the Scene

- Always carry protection.
- If someone approaches you, but you are not interested, be polite, but tell them so.
- If you like someone, it is OK to talk to them, but respect people's personal space.
- If you decide to go home with someone, make sure someone knows where you are going, and that your phone is charged.

Some people will really enjoy going out on the scene, but if you don't that's OK too. There are lots of ways to make friends or meet other LGBT people, that doesn't involve going to an LGBT bar or club.



relationships

Before entering into a relationship with someone, whether it's casual or serious, it is important to think about what you want from another person. The key to any good relationship is communication and respect.

If you start going out with someone, you might want to have sex. There are lots of things you can do, like kissing and cuddling, touching each other, mutual masturbation, or oral, vaginal or anal sex. The key to good sex is feeling comfortable with your partner and understanding what each other want. The best way to do this is through talking to each other, being honest, and taking things at your own pace. It is never OK to be pressured into doing things you don't want to. Another good way to find out what you like and don't like sexually is through masturbation and getting to know your own body.

When having sex with someone it is important to make sure you protect yourself from Sexually Transmitted Infections (STIs) including HIV. You can reduce the risk by using a condom and oil free lubricant for penetrative sex (vaginal & anal) and a condom or dental dam for oral sex. It's important to educate yourself around safer sex and to be willing to discuss it with your partner before you start having sex.

There are lots of leaflets, websites and other resources that are available on safer sex. One example of these is the Healthy Respect website: www.healthyrespect.co.uk.

Homophobia & Bullying

Sadly, many lesbian, gay and bisexual people still experience homophobia and/or bullying at some stage in their life, whether it is at school, college, university, work or in the street. Homophobia is physical or verbal abuse to someone because they are or are assumed to be lesbian, gay or bisexual. Homophobia or bullying can include name calling, being threatened, being hit or kicked, being made fun of, being ignored, or having rumours spread about you. No person deserves to be bullied or to be the victim of homophobia – it is never acceptable.

If you are being bullied or discriminated against because you are lesbian, gay or bisexual, you might want to:

- Talk to someone you trust about it.
- Report it to your school/college/university/employer.
- Report it to the police.
- Get support from an LGBT group.
- Contact victim support if you have been the victim of a hate crime at www.victimsupportsco.org.uk.

Challenging the bullying behaviour on your own is never a good idea, as you might be putting yourself in danger.

For more information on bullying, visit: www.respectme.org.uk.

Reporting a Hate Crime

The law changed in 2009 to further protect LGBT people from hate crime. This means that if you are the victim of a crime which was motivated by homophobia, such as being physically harmed while homophobic comments are made, you can report it to the police.

The police have been encouraging reporting of this type of crime and take it very seriously. You can contact the police on 999 in an emergency, or if you don't report it at the time but decide to later, you can do so by contacting your local police station.

If for whatever reason you are unsure about going to the police, then you can make a *remote report* (sometimes called 3rd party reporting) via a local support agency who are linked into the police. LGBT Youth Scotland is one of these agencies, with remote reporting available at all its local services. LGBT Youth Scotland's website also has detailed information and links to each police force area across Scotland, which lists all remote reporting agencies.

Please see www.lgbtyouth.org.uk/advice/remote-reporting.htm.



**advice for
family +
friends**

If someone close to you comes out as lesbian, gay or bisexual, you may be unsure about how you feel about it or how to respond. It will probably take time to get used to the idea, especially if you weren't expecting it. It is important to let the person know that you still care about them, even if you don't understand it all straight away.

Regardless of your initial thoughts or feelings, remember that just because someone identifies as lesbian, gay or bisexual doesn't make them any less of a friend or family member. Think about how you felt about them before they told you and ask yourself why this would change just because they are attracted to people of the same gender or both genders.

It's OK to let the person know that it might take you time to get used to the idea, but that you will do your best to support them. It's also OK to ask questions, as this shows that you are taking them seriously. At the same time, try and be sensitive about how they are feeling – it's not easy coming out to someone close to you. Other sections of this booklet can help to answer some of these questions or how to ask them in a sensitive way.

Many lesbian, gay and bisexual people are coming out at a younger age due to increased information and greater acceptance. If a friend or family member comes out at a young age, it can be easy to dismiss it as a phase. Most people who come out have put a lot of thought into it before telling someone, so it is important to take it seriously. Try and let the person explore their sexuality without trying to change or pressure them.



rights + legislation

There have been lots of new pieces of legislation over the last few years which give lesbian, gay, and bisexual people more rights to be recognised, included and kept safe from harm. This section lists a few of the key pieces of legislation and what they mean for you.

The Criminal Justice (Scotland) Act 1980

This law brought an end to the prosecution of men who have sex with men, although the age of consent was 21 rather than 16 for heterosexual sex. A gay or bisexual man over 21 who had sex with another consenting man over 21 was no longer committing a criminal offence.

The Sexual Offences (Amendment) Act 2000

This law equalised the age of consent for sexual intercourse at 16 for everyone. This means that the age at which sex between two consenting men is legal is now the same as that for a man and a woman.

The Employment Equality Sexual Orientation Regulations 2003

This law makes the discrimination and harassment on grounds of sexual orientation in employment, vocational training, and colleges and universities illegal.

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The Civil Partnership Act 2004

This law created same-sex civil unions that extend the privileges of marriage to same-sex couples in all but name. The Family Law (Scotland) Act 2006 gives the same rights to same-sex couples who are not in a Civil Partnership as it does to unmarried heterosexual couples.

The Adoption & Children (Scotland) Act 2007

This law means that unmarried couples and same sex couples can now jointly adopt a child, with both partners being legally recognised as full parents.

The Equality Act (Sexual Orientation) Regulations 2007

This law prohibits the discrimination on grounds of sexual orientation in the provision of *goods, facilities and services*, including retail, health care, education, leisure centres, hotels and public transport.

The Offences (Aggravation by Prejudice) (Scotland) Act 2009

This piece of law gives further protections to all LGBT people who experience any crime which includes a homophobic element, for example if someone is physically harmed while homophobic comments are made.

The Equality Bill is a piece of law which is going through parliament just now (Winter 2009) which we hope will extend protections and rights to more LGBT people – please keep an eye on LGBT Youth Scotland’s website for more information: <http://www.lgbtyouth.org.uk/information-centre.htm>.



definitions

Gay

A man who is physically/emotionally attracted to other men.

Lesbian/Gay

A woman who is physically/ emotionally attracted to other women.

Bisexual

A person who is attracted to both men and women.

Transgender

Someone who identifies as a different gender to that which they were assigned at birth.

Coming Out

Knowing and telling people who you are and who you are attracted to.

Questioning

When someone is still unsure about their sexual orientation.

LGBT

Stands for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender.



**myths
+ facts**

Myth: Being lesbian, gay or bisexual is just a phase.

Fact: Lots of people do experiment with their sexuality, but for lesbian, gay and bisexual people, being attracted to the same gender or both genders all their life is no different to straight people being attracted to the opposite sex.

Myth: Being lesbian, gay or bisexual is a choice/lifestyle.

Fact: People do not choose who they are attracted to, whether they are lesbian, gay, bisexual or straight.

Myth: Lesbian, gay and bisexual people can be *cured*.

Fact: There is no valid scientific evidence that shows a person's sexual orientation can be changed, but many experts have warned that trying to do so can be extremely damaging.

Myth: Being lesbian, gay or bisexual is unnatural.

Fact: There is nothing unnatural about being attracted to or loving someone regardless of their gender.

Myth: Being lesbian, gay or bisexual means you can't be religious.

Fact: Although some religions/ faiths still condemn being lesbian, gay or bisexual, lots of LGBT people are religious or follow the teachings of a religion.

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Myth: Bisexual people are just confused.

Fact: Many people are attracted to both men & women all their lives and don't feel any more confused over their sexual orientation than anyone else.

Myth: Bisexual people are greedy.

Fact: Being attracted to both genders doesn't make a person greedy, it's no different from being attracted to one.

Myth: Bisexual people are just gay or lesbian people who haven't admitted it yet.

Fact: Some gay and lesbian people will identify as bisexual first as part of the coming out process but many people happily identify as bisexual all their life.

Myth: It's fashionable to be bi.

Fact: Some people may think its cool/fashionable to be bisexual, but this type of attitude can prevent people who are genuinely bisexual from being taken seriously. This links back to ideas of sexual orientation being a choice or a lifestyle that can be changed.

Myth: Lesbians/gay men fancy every woman/man they see.

Fact: Some lesbians/gay men will be attracted to lots of women/men and some just a few; most will be somewhere in the middle. Your sexual orientation has no direct relation to how many or how few people you are attracted to and is no different to heterosexual people's attraction to people of the opposite gender.

Myth: Lesbians/gay men are promiscuous and will try and jump into bed with every woman/man they meet.

Fact: Again, a person's sexual orientation has nothing to do with how many or how few partners a person will have.

Myth: All lesbians are butch/All gay men are camp.

Fact: Gay, lesbian and bisexual people are as varied as straight people. Some lesbians will be butch and some won't. Some gay men will be camp and some won't. You should never feel pressure to act a certain way or change how you behave just because of your sexual orientation.

Useful Links & Websites

LGBT Youth Scotland

www.lgbtyouth.org.uk

Human Rights Campaign

www.hrc.org

Equality Network

www.equality-network.org

National LGBT Forum

www.scottishlgbt.org

Queer Youth Network (Online Forum)

www.queeryouth.org.uk

Stonewall Scotland

www.stonewallscotland.org.uk

Scotland's LGBT Domestic Abuse Project

www.lgbtdomesticabuse.org.uk

Scottish Transgender Alliance

www.scottishtrans.org

Gay & Lesbian Youth Northern Ireland

www.glyni.org.uk

Belong To – LGBT Youth Organisation, Ireland

www.belongto.org

International Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer Youth and Student Organisation

www.iglyo.com

International Gay and Lesbian Association

www.igla.org

LGBT Youth Scotland

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