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A Library and Resource Center on Alcohol, Tobacco, Other Drugs, Mental Health and Wellness

Gay, Lesbian and Bisexual Adolescents

Growing up is a demanding and challenging task for every adolescent. One important aspect is forming one's sexual identity. All children explore and experiment sexually as part of normal development. This sexual behavior may be with members of the same or opposite sex. For many adolescents, thinking about and/or experimenting with people of the same sex may cause concerns and anxiety regarding their sexual orientation. For others, even thoughts or fantasies may cause anxiety. These feelings and behavior do not necessarily mean an individual is homosexual or bisexual.

Homosexuality is the persistent sexual and emotional attraction to someone of the same sex. It is part of the range of sexual expression. Homosexuality has existed throughout history and across cultures. Many gay, lesbian and bisexual individuals first become aware of and experience their sexual thoughts and feelings during childhood and adolescence. Recent changes in society's attitude toward sexuality have helped gay, lesbian, and bisexual teens feel more comfortable with their sexual orientation. In other aspects of their development, they are similar to heterosexual youngsters. They experience the same kinds of stress, struggles, and tasks during adolescence.



Parents need to clearly understand that sexual orientation is not a mental disorder. The cause(s) of homosexuality or bisexuality are not fully understood. However, a person's sexual orientation is not a matter of choice. In other words, individuals have no more choice about being homosexual or bisexual than heterosexual. All teenagers do have a choice about their expression of sexual behaviors and lifestyle, regardless of their sexual orientation.

Despite increased knowledge and information, gay, lesbian and bisexual teens still have many concerns. These include:

- feeling different from peers
- feeling guilty about their sexual orientation
- worrying about the response from their families and loved ones
- being teased and ridiculed by their peers
- worrying about AIDS, HIV infection, and other sexually transmitted diseases
- fearing discrimination when joining clubs, sports, seeking admission to college, and finding employment
- being rejected and harassed by others

Gay, lesbian, and bisexual teens can become socially isolated, withdraw from activities and friends, have trouble concentrating, and develop low self-esteem. Some may develop depression and think about suicide or attempt it. Parents and others need to be alert to these signs of distress because recent studies show that gay, lesbian and bisexual youth account for a significant number of deaths by suicide during adolescence.

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It is important for parents to understand their teen's sexual orientation and to provide emotional support. Parents may have difficulty accepting their teen's sexuality for some of the same reasons that the youngster wants to keep it secret. Gay, lesbian or bisexual adolescents should be allowed to decide when and to whom to disclose their homosexuality. Telling a person's sexuality before they are ready is called "outing" and can be traumatic. Parents and other family members may gain understanding and support from organizations such as Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG).

Counseling may be helpful for teens who are uncomfortable with their sexual orientation or uncertain about how to express it. They may benefit from support and the opportunity to clarify their feelings. Therapy may also help the teen adjust to personal, family, and school-related issues or conflicts that emerge. Therapy directed specifically at changing sexual orientation is not recommended and may be harmful for an unwilling teen. It may create more confusion and anxiety by reinforcing the negative thoughts and emotions with which the youngster is already struggling.

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