



I THINK I MIGHT BE GAY ... NOW WHAT DO I DO?

A Brochure for Young Men

Information for gay youth and young men questioning their sexuality

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE GAY?

Men who call themselves gay are sexually attracted to and fall in love with other men. Their sexual feelings toward men are normal and natural for them. These feelings emerge when they are boys and the feelings continue into adulthood. Although some gay men may also be attracted to women, they usually say that their feelings for men are stronger and more important to them.

We know that about one out of ten people in the world is gay or lesbian (lesbians are women who are attracted to other women). This means that in any large group of people, there are usually several gay people present. However, you cannot tell if someone is gay or not unless he or she wants you to know. Gay people blend right in with other people. But they often feel different from other people.

Gay teenagers may not be able to specify just why they feel different. All of the guys they know seem to be attracted to girls, so they don't know where they fit in. And, they may not feel comfortable talking with an adult about their feelings.

HOW DO I KNOW IF I'M GAY?

"I don't remember exactly when I first knew I was gay, but I do remember that the thought of sex with men always excited me"--Alan, age 19.

"I never had any real attraction towards women, but I really knew that I was gay when puberty began. I felt an attraction toward the other boys and I was curious to find out what they were like"--James, age 17.

"One day I was flipping through a magazine, there was a cute guy, and bam! I knew"--Antonio, age 16.

You may not know what to call your sexual feelings. You don't have to rush and decide how to label yourself right now. Our sexual identities develop over time. Most adolescent boys are intensely sexual during the years around puberty (usually between 11 and 15 years old), when their bodies start changing and their hormones are flowing in new ways. Your sexual feelings may be so strong that they are not directed toward particular persons or situations, but seem to emerge without cause. As you get older you will figure out who you are really attracted to.

Boys with truly gay feelings find that, over time, their attractions to boys and men get more and more clearly focused. You may find yourself falling in love with your classmates or maybe developing a crush on a particular adult man. You may find these experiences pleasurable, troubling, or a mix of the two. By age 16 or 17 many gay kids start thinking about what to call themselves, while others prefer to wait. If you think you might be gay, ask yourself:

- When I dream or fantasize sexually, is it about boys or girls?

- Have I ever had a crush or been in love with a boy or a man?
- Do I feel different than other guys?
- Are my feelings for boys and men true and clear?

If you cannot answer these questions now, don't worry. You will be more sure in time. You and only you know how to label yourself correctly.

MAKING CONTACT

So, you may be ready to find out more. Start by reading. If you feel comfortable, ask the librarian in the "Young Adult" section of your public library. Librarians are usually glad to help. If your library does not have much on sexuality you may want to check out the "GAY" section of a large bookstore, or possibly order books and other material through the mail. Please note that not all books about gay people are supportive.

Try calling a gay hotline. Most major cities have one. You may want to call from a phone booth for privacy. They will let you talk about your feelings and will direct you to organizations that help gay people. There may even be a gay youth group in your area.

Remember, gay people are out there, wherever you are. Trust your instincts. Sooner or later you will meet someone who feels some of the same things you do.

"When I first met another gay person, I felt excited, anxious, nervous and happy. There was an indescribable relief to know that I was not alone, that there was someone else like me. It was also intimidating, not knowing what to expect, but I quickly loosened up and felt relaxed" -- Nathan, age 18.

"When I first made contact with another gay man, I felt a tremendous relief. I couldn't believe I had made a connection. I felt happy but also scared. I felt that I could do or say anything and not worry about it"--Alan, age 19.

"When I first met another gay person, it was incredible, refreshing, reassuring, touching, awesome, and wonderful"--James, age 17

WILL I EVER HAVE SEX?

Naturally, you think about finding an outlet for your sexual feelings. Becoming a healthy sexual person is part of the coming out process. You may be scared at the prospect of having sex. This is normal for everyone. No one should start having sex until they are ready. Until then, you may choose to masturbate or fantasize. Sex should only happen between mature individuals who care about each other. You will know when the time is right.

We all choose to have sex in different ways, whether we are gay or straight. Gay men choose from a wide range of sexual practices, including masturbation (either alone or with another person or persons), oral sex, anal intercourse, kissing, hugging, massage, wrestling, holding hands, cuddling or anything else that appeals to both partners. You are in complete control over what you do sexually and with whom.

WHAT ABOUT AIDS?

All sexually active people need to be aware of AIDS as well as other sexually transmitted diseases. Being gay does not give you AIDS, but certain sexual practices and certain drug use behaviors can put you at risk for catching the virus that causes AIDS. AIDS is incurable, but is preventable.

Here's how to reduce your risk of getting AIDS:

- Do not shoot up drugs. Sharing needles is the most dangerous behavior in terms of getting AIDS.

- Avoid anal intercourse or other direct anal contact. Anal intercourse transmits the virus very efficiently. If you do engage in anal sex, use a condom every time.
- Use condoms whenever you engage in anal or oral sex (or vaginal sex if you have sex with women). You should choose latex condoms that are fresh and undamaged. Store them away from heat (your wallet is not a good place to keep them). Use a condom only once. Try to choose condoms with "reservoir tips", and be sure to squeeze out the air from the tip as you put it on. Hold on to the condom as you remove your penis; sometimes they slip off after sex.
- Or choose sexual activities that do not involve intercourse: hugging, kissing, talking, massaging, wrestling or masturbating (on unbroken skin).

LEARNING TO LIKE YOURSELF

"I had to reject a lot of negative heterosexual and religious programming that made me feel lousy about myself as a gay person. I began to like myself by meeting other gay people and going to a gay support group. After that I was content with myself"--Bill, age 18.

"My aunt is a lesbian, and she made it clear to me, before I even knew I was gay, that being gay was OK"--Antonio, age 16.

"I accepted the facts, which means that I don't deny being gay and I don't pretend to be someone I'm not"--Alan, age 19.

It's not easy to discover that you are gay. Our society makes it very clear what it thinks of gay people. We all hear the terrible jokes, the hurtful stereotypes and the wrong ideas that circulate about gay people. People tend to hate or fear what they don't understand. Some people hate lesbians and gay men. Many people are uncomfortable being around lesbians and gay men. It's no wonder that you might choose to hide your gay feelings from others. You might even be tempted to hide them from yourself.

You may wonder if you are normal. Perhaps you worry about people finding out about you. Maybe you avoid other kids who might be gay because of what people will think. Working this hard to conceal your thoughts and feelings is called being in the closet. It is a painful and lonely place to be, even if you stay there in order to survive.

It takes a lot of energy to deny your feelings, and it can be costly. You may have tried using alcohol or other drugs to numb yourself against these thoughts. You may have considered suicide. If so, please consult the phone book for the Samaritans or other hotline. There are alternatives to denying your very valuable feelings.

WHO SHOULD I TELL?

"I only tell other people that I'm gay if I've known them for a long time and if they are accepting and tolerant. I think it's important that they know about this special part of me"--Bill, age 18.

"Since I'm normal, I don't have to hide how I feel. But you should make sure that you are comfortable with your preference before you blurt it out to just anyone"--Nathan, age 19.

"I tell people that I'm gay if I know that they won't reject me, will accept me for what I am, and won't try to 'straighten' me out. I test them, I suppose, then I judge if I want to risk telling them"--James, age 17.

More and more gay kids are learning to feel better about themselves. As you start to listen to your deepest feelings and learn more about what it means to be gay you will begin to be comfortable with your sexuality. This is the process called coming out.

The first step in coming out is to tell yourself that you are gay and say, "That's OK." Later you may want to tell someone else--someone you trust to be understanding and sympathetic. You might choose a friend or an adult. You will probably want to meet other gay kids for friendship or a more intimate relationship. Some gay kids are able to come out to their families. You need to decide whether or not to tell your family, and to choose the right time. Lots of people, including parents, simply don't understand gay people and are difficult to come out to. In the beginning, be cautious about whom you tell.

But it is crucial to be honest with yourself. Just as self-denial costs you, coming out pays off. Most kids who accept their sexuality say they feel calmer, happier and more confident.

"No matter what people say, you are normal. God created you, and you were made in this [sic] image. If you are non-religious, you were born and you have a purpose, and being gay is only part of it"--Nathan, age 19.

"Stand up for what you believe in, and don't listen to what hate-mongers have to say. Stay proud and confident"--James, age 17.

This brochure was written by Kevin Cranston and Cooper Thompson, with help from members of BAGLY, Boston Area Gay and Lesbian Youth.

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