



COMING
out



A WOMAN'S GUIDE



INTRODUCTION

Coming out can be a difficult process, particularly as an older woman. Some women come bounding out of the 'closet', some may come out in stages, others may never come out; this is their choice and no-one has the right to force that process.

This leaflet has been produced by a group of lesbian and bisexual women, for women aged 30+ who are questioning their sexuality or are now identifying as lesbian or bisexual. Some women come out in their teens or twenties, but there are a significant number of us who come out into our 40s, 50s, 60s and beyond.

We have not included transgender women specifically in this guide as our focus is on sexual not gender identity, however this guide is inclusive of the many transgender women who identify as lesbian or bisexual.

We hope that by sharing our experience with you that we can help you through this process at your own pace and show you that you are not alone. We have ordered this guide into what we hope is a logical progression of steps, however we are aware that people's journeys may not follow this route, so if you take a different route it doesn't mean you're doing it wrong!

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lesbian

A woman who's primary sexual attraction is to other women.

Myth

All lesbians look like men. They have short hair, wear men's clothes, and never wear make up. If you want to be accepted as a lesbian you'll have to look the same.

Fact

Lesbians come in all shapes & sizes and have the same range of tastes in fashion and hairstyles as the rest of society. You can wear the clothes you like and have any hairstyle you like.

Myth

Lesbians are equally attracted to all women.

Fact

Before you started to question your sexuality, did you fancy all men? Of course not! Fortunately, we are all attracted to different types of women.

Myth

Lesbians hate men.

Fact

No we don't. We have sons brothers, fathers, cousins and male friends.

bisexual

To experience a sexual bond and attraction to both men and women.

This attraction may be stronger for one sex or the other, or it may be 50/50, but a bisexual person is comfortable having sexual encounters or relationships with members of either sex. Often a bisexual person will state that the "person is more important than the gender."

Myth

Bisexuals are greedy/promiscuous.

Fact

Bisexuals, like lesbians, gay men and heterosexuals, may be polyamorous, monogamous, promiscuous, celibate and/or virgins.

Myth

Bisexual women are lesbians who can't admit it yet - or straight women who are trying to be cool.

Fact

Bisexuality is a valid identity, some people may use it as a transitional ID but others will always feel bisexual - regardless of their partner's gender. If someone says they're bi, it's only polite to accept it.

Myth

Bisexuals are confused.

Fact

As the saying goes; *I'm bisexual, you're confused.*

So, am I lesbian, bisexual or heterosexual?

Only you know whether you are lesbian, bisexual or heterosexual. The first step is to be honest with yourself about your feelings. It may take a lot of courage, but often admitting your true feelings can be a huge relief and open the way to more satisfying and honest relationships. Being lesbian, bisexual or heterosexual isn't good or bad, right or wrong, it just is. Lesbian and bisexual women are daughters, sisters, mothers, grandmothers.

But I don't look like a lesbian!

Very few of us do. Lesbian and bisexual women are as varied as heterosexual women. Few of us fit a stereotype. We come from all walks of life, from all ethnic backgrounds, have all kinds of jobs and wear all kinds of clothes.

Why this question now?

Questions about sexual identity can arise at any time of our lives. You may have assumed until recently that you were heterosexual. Perhaps you have been married, or lived with male partners, and have just started to feel attracted to women, or fallen in love with a woman for the first time. Perhaps you had your first lesbian or bisexual relationship as a teenager and thought that this was 'just a passing phase'. Perhaps you have been having lesbian or bisexual relationships in secret. With the tremendous pressure in our society to be heterosexual, it is hardly surprising that you may only be questioning your sexuality now, at whatever age you are.

"At the age of 26 I discovered I was gay. I met a woman who was 40 and we fell in love. Well, that's the short version. I was so confused at the time as I thought I was straight even though I had never been in love with a man. Until then I didn't believe in love but since then I've been living as a lesbian and I've been in love three times. Now I am single, 42 and still believe in love. If someone told me at the age of 25 that I'd fall in love with a woman I wouldn't have believed them."

Linda

Why do I feel so bad / confused?

If you think you are lesbian or bisexual you might feel terrible. You might feel very lonely and be terrified of the possible reactions of your family and friends. You are not alone. Many of us who now live happy, fulfilled lives have had to go through a time of feeling bad or confused while we came to terms with our sexuality. This is not because being lesbian or bisexual is wrong but because of 'internalised homophobia'. As we are growing up we internalise the messages of society around us and, unfortunately, these often include anti-gay (homophobic) messages. However liberal you may think you are, it is often much harder to accept your own homosexuality than other peoples'. You may have internalised homophobia that tells you that lesbians and bisexual women are abnormal and that your sexuality is unacceptable. It is not. Lesbians and bisexual women are every bit as 'normal' as heterosexual women. Although society hasn't always made us welcome, other gay people will, and so will many, many straight people. A good way to combat internalised homophobia is to meet other women who are bisexual or lesbian and to get accurate information.

What support can I get?

The best sources of information are often lesbian switchboards, which you will find listed in your telephone directory. Phoning your local lesbian helpline may take a lot of courage, but remember that all the volunteers who work there are gay or bisexual and many of them will have gone through a similar process and will be able to understand how you feel. You can also get information by ringing one of the organisations listed at the end of this guide.

3 COMING OUT TO OTHERS

Coming out to parents, family and friends can be a difficult process; you are sharing something very personal with people you love. The dynamics of family relationships vary enormously from family to family, and your approach will depend entirely on this. With this in mind, we make some suggestions regarding coming out to a partner, parents, or children.

a COMING OUT TO A STRAIGHT PARTNER

Take into account that what might be a relief for you to say, might be hard for your straight partner to hear. A lot will depend on how much you have shared with them already about your sexuality. Being open about it might just confirm what they have already known or suspected and might enable you to discuss it more. It might, however, come as a shock to your partner. They may never have suspected that you were anything other than straight.

At first they may be stunned. They may want to keep you close at any costs. They may be angry, frightened or worried that it was something that they did or did not do that caused this change.

Whatever you tell your partner you should keep the following in mind-

Why you are telling them?

What you hope to get out of telling them?

Think through the best time / place / who and how.

Think about how you would deal with a range of responses.

Think through the best and worst outcomes and how will you deal with them.

Have information on support agencies that are around for your partner.

"Telling my straight partner, who I was separated from, that I was in a relationship with a woman, was extremely difficult. All reasonableness about our separation and divorce disappeared along with a share of his pension and any goodwill between us. He couldn't cope even though we hadn't lived together for two years. He made life difficult and my new partner and I had to move away. He told our adult son that he wanted to kill himself and that it was all my fault. He wanted to kill me as well. It was all my new partners fault. Seven years later he is now in another relationship and wants us all to be mates. I'm happy that he is OK and in a new relationship however, I don't feel the need to be mates. Although it was a traumatic time my partner and I are still together, still going strong. It was the hardest and the best thing I ever did."
Anne

Telling your straight partner might have implications other than emotional. Do you share a home together? Mortgage? Children? Credit Cards? There may be other practical things that need to be taken into account. Telling your straight partner about your sexuality may require a bit more thinking about and planning than other people. Talk it through with someone who understands; maybe contact your local Switchboard.

b

COMING OUT TO YOUR PARENTS

Remember that your parents are from a different generation, when homophobia was more widespread. Accept that they may find your coming out difficult. Be patient and understanding. Tell them being gay is not a rejection of their lifestyle or values.

It may be easier to tell another member of your family first, as a step towards telling your parents.

Give them time. You've had time to come out to yourself, put yourself in their shoes and give them time to get used to the idea. Encourage them, when they are ready, to speak to a friend or family member; you needed to come out to others for support, and they will need to do this too. Having a list of phone numbers, such as one for Parent's Enquiry could help too.

Be prepared and patient; be prepared for negative responses and religious fears. Be ready to teach, explain that your sexual orientation is a biologically based thing, and you can't control it any more than they can control their own sexual orientation. Explain why you are coming out, explain that you are telling them this because you love them and don't want to be dishonest with them.

When telling children, particularly younger children, choose a quiet place where you won't be interrupted. Make sure you have plenty of time for explanations and expressions of feelings. Let your children know that this disclosure does not change your relationship with them except to make it more honest. The following are some questions children may ask and some suggested responses. Older children, including those who are now adult, may find it difficult to understand. They may have similar questions as younger children; they may need more time to sort out their own thoughts and feelings, and to accept this different part of your identity. Give them time and answer their questions as honestly and openly as you can.

Why are you telling me this?

Because I love you, and I don't want to be dishonest with you.

What does being lesbian / bisexual mean?

Being lesbian means being attracted to another woman, being bisexual means being attracted to both men & women.

What makes a person lesbian / bisexual?

No one knows exactly what makes some people attracted to men and some attracted to women. (The child might really be asking, "Will I be lesbian / bisexual?" or "How will I know if I am lesbian / bisexual?")

Will I be lesbian / bisexual?

You will not be lesbian / bisexual just because I am, you are a separate person.

Do you hate men?

This question might mean, "Do you hate Dad?" Coming from sons, this question might mean, "Do you hate me?"

Did your lover make you lesbian / bisexual?

No, I fell in love with her.

What should I tell others about this?

Explain the difference between privacy and secrecy to your child or children, and that they may want to tell friends they are close to, but that they shouldn't feel that they have to tell everyone.

4

RELIGION & SEXUALITY

Some people may lead you to believe that religion and our sexuality shouldn't be mixed - this is untrue. You may think that if you describe yourself as being bisexual or lesbian, then you don't and can't belong in any place of worship, and that your faith may diminish. This is also untrue.

Thousands of bisexual and lesbian women are living proof that you can combine both your faith and your sexuality throughout your daily life. You can attend your place of worship and feel free, safe and secure in that place.

Your religion, faith, understandings and beliefs are private and personal to you. Your time spent in prayer, worship, meditation and reading of scriptures is a private time regardless of your sexuality. Nothing and no one can ever take that away from you. Though some faith leaders may want to test you, to check that you are really sure about your sexuality.

When you feel that the time is right for you to speak to your worship leader about your sexuality you must feel ready within yourself to discuss various aspects of your faith and beliefs.

Negative press and media attention has created a tremendous focal point regarding the issues surrounding religion and sexuality. It is your choice which religious belief you decide to follow. It is your choice which sexual identity you use to describe yourself. Less knowledgeable or understanding people from your place of worship may want to judge you on both your choices. From time to time this may happen. They have no right or power to do this, do you judge them? You have to be true to your religious beliefs and be true to your sexual preference.

"When I started to come out to family and friends, I realised that I was more nervous about coming out to my minister than to anyone else. I actually left my church for over a year as I went through the coming out process. I eventually decided that the time was right for me to be honest with my minister. I was more worried about being rejected by my minister and my church, than by anyone else. I've attended church since I was 4 years old. Thirty-two years on I still have a tremendous feeling of inner peace and spiritual wellbeing. But I did have a few panic attacks on the day that I came out to my minister."
Claire

You may be reading this and thinking, my worship leader may not be as understanding as the previous experience relates. At the end of the guide you will find details of all the major LGBT faith groups. These groups will be able to help you with any questions relating specifically to your faith, your sexuality and your beliefs.

Well you've done it! You've finally come out to yourself, you may not have come out to your family and your friends yet, but where do you go from here?

The key is to take things at your own pace, as quickly or slowly as you like. You may be raring to get out on the scene, or may want to take your time to get used to this new aspect of your identity.

You may even question your sexuality again once you start meeting new people.

"When I first went out on the scene, I met a lovely woman who was very friendly & supportive of me as a 'new dyke'. She was obviously attracted to me and we started spending time together. I quickly realised that I wasn't attracted to her and started to question my sexual identity again, was I really a dyke? Soon after we parted company amicably. A few months I later met another woman who I was attracted to, and have been in a relationship with her for the last 8 years."

Alison

Going out on the scene

Find a venue, which you feel comfortable in, or avoid the scene all together what ever suits you. If pubs & clubs aren't for you, contact your local switchboard or LGBT Centre to find out what alternatives there are to the scene, they may have a group for people who are new to the area or have just come out, which will give you the chance to meet some new people. Both will also have information about existing social and activity groups in your area.

"When I first came out I enjoyed going to scene venues, it was exciting and it gave me a feeling of belonging and acceptance, and I didn't have to sneak glances at women any more."

Susan

6 SEX & ME

What will being 'out' mean to me sexually?

Coming out as an older woman can mean that you have more of a sexual history behind you, you may have had many or no previous sexual partners. You'll have a whole range of ideas, attitudes and values around sex and how you 'should' behave sexually. Some of these ideas may be at odds with how you would like to be sexually as your new 'out' self.

Only you can decide what is right for you sexually. You may want to experiment; you may want to be celibate. You may want lots of sexual experiences without being attached to someone; you may want to wait for the right woman. It's your choice. Only you know what is right for you. What might be right now may change in the future. It's your choice.

How will I know what to do?

How does anyone know what to do sexually? We learn through trial, error and talking to our partner, the latter being by far the best option. Talk to your partner, ask for what you want, let them teach you what they want.

Remember that the best sex comes when you respect each other and only do whatever each of you desires.

Don't do anything you don't want to or feel uncomfortable doing. It's OK to feel excited, it's not OK to feel frightened or pushed into doing things you don't want to do.

Safer sex

Having safer sex means not getting more than you asked for, like infections or STI's (sexually transmitted infections). Whilst as a woman in a sexual relationship with another woman you are at the lower end of the risk tables, don't think that you can't get infections. You can and, while statistics won't necessarily protect you, information and a few sensible precautions may.

STI's are increasing rapidly amongst all sexually active groups. There are a number of things you can do to avoid picking one up:

Talk to your partner - the more open you are the less at risk you may be. If you have had, or have, an STI; let your partner know.

Remember that infections can be transmitted by touch, transferring of body fluids and by mouth. Some STIs, like herpes or thrush, can exist in the mouth as well as around the genital areas. If in doubt use a dental dam to prevent any cross infection from mouth to vulval area.

Use a condom to cover any sex toys you use as this will prevent the spread of any infection.

Find out about the main STI's, know the symptoms and how to prevent them.

Safe, Fun Sex

Sex isn't just for the young; it's for everyone!

Everyone is not the same and what we each desire is different.

Only do what you desire.

Parents frequently ask:

Is it my fault?

Sexual orientation is an inherent part of a person; you can't make or unmake them lesbian or gay. It is an important part of them, but only a part; they are still the same person.

"I'm the mother of two daughters. Initially, it was a shock to the system when my first-born told me that she was a lesbian. Today, I find it strange to be asked how I feel as the mother of a lesbian daughter, when I see myself as the mother of two human beings with different sexual orientations, both being independent, strong women and both of whom I love dearly."

Betty

What about grandchildren?

Lesbians have children these days through various methods, and heterosexual children do not necessarily produce grandchildren.

Is it a phase?

It may be or it may not, only your daughter will know how she feels. Give her time and respect her views on the matter.

Why was I last to know?

Many people have told us that 'coming out' to friends was stressful but 'coming out' to parents involves a much greater risk. Rejection by them would be so much worse so they often try telling other people first. They also need to feel confident in themselves before they can take on your reaction.

What about the physical side of her life?

There is information available about safer sex. The physical side of her life is as private as if she were a heterosexual daughter. If she wants to discuss it with you and you are comfortable with that, treat it with the same respect.

Life is difficult enough, why did she choose to be a lesbian or bisexual woman?

Sexual orientation is not a choice; often our children have agonised over their feelings and had to come to terms with it themselves. When they are brave enough to tell us, we need to learn how to support them.

“I am the mother of a lesbian daughter. I regret that I made the transition to acceptance much harder because I wasn't prepared and I wasn't informed. Three years on, I feel privileged to have had the experience.”

Pat

Will she be lonely in her old age?

Hopefully she will have friends and with the new legislation she should have as much chance as anyone who is heterosexual of having a partnership, which is fully recognised by law. Legal recognition of same sex relationships is likely to be on the statute books before long.

Is there a cure?

Being lesbian or gay is not an illness. It does not need a cure. Attempts to change gay people can be extremely dangerous and cause great distress and possibly cause mental health problems.

What will the neighbours say?

Don't tell people unless your daughter wants them to know. She may have to deal with things before she is ready. Make sure that you are confident enough to cope with different reactions; it is not easy to anticipate how people will react. If you feel confident you can help other people accept it.

If you want to confide in someone, make sure they are knowledgeable; people can say some outrageous things and it can be very upsetting when you are just beginning to deal with the situation. If it has not been a problem to you that is great and hopefully more and more people will be able to react like that as society becomes better informed.

“I have befriended parents of gay children for 30 years. In that time, social and political circumstances have changed a great deal but the core problems facing parents of gay people seem to have remained very much the same.”

Marjorie

Can lesbians be good parents?

Yes, studies comparing groups of children raised by homosexual and by heterosexual parents find no developmental differences between the two groups of children. It is also important to realize that a parent's sexual orientation does not dictate that of their children.

Thanks to Parent's Enquiry for writing this section.



CONTACT INFORMATION

LGBT Centre for Health and Wellbeing

9 Howe Street
Edinburgh
EH3 6TE
0131 523 1104
Info@lgbthealth.org.uk

Glasgow LGBT Centre

11 Dixon Street
Glasgow
G1 4AL
0141 221 7203
admin@glgbt.org.uk

Bi Scotland

Scotland's national organisation for bisexuals or those exploring the possibility of being bisexual, offering a safe environment. Regular meetings and social events in Edinburgh and Glasgow.

www.biscotland.org

Equality Network

For legal advice and information
30 Bernard Street
Edinburgh
EH6 6PR
0702 093 3952
en@equality-network.org

Connect-ed

Edinburgh based lesbian and bisexual women's counselling service.
07906 178220

Parent's Enquiry Scotland

Offers support to parents and their LGBT sons and daughters, based in Lothian.

Marjorie: 0131 337 5258
Rosemary: 0131 664 4496
Jane and John: 01506 844498
E-mail: parentsenquiry@hotmail.com

Lesbian Mothers' Group

Lesbian Mothers Scotland
c/o One Parent Families Scotland
13 Gayfield Square
Edinburgh
EH1 3NX
0131 556 3899/4563

Phace Scotland

Offers counselling for people coming out and other services.
49 Bath Street
Glasgow
G2 2DL
0141 332 3838
fax 0141 332 3755
email contact@phacescotland.org

Lothian Gay & Lesbian Switchboard

Nightly 7:30 - 10pm 0131 556 4049
Lothian Lesbian Line Mon, Thurs.7.30 - 10pm 0131 557 0751

Strathclyde Lesbian & Gay Switchboard

Strathclyde Lesbian & Gay Switchboard, nightly 7-10pm 0141 847 0447
Strathclyde Lesbian Line, Wednesday 7.30-10pm 0141 847 0647

24hr London Lesbian and Gay Switchboard 020 7837 7324

For a list of all switchboard numbers see: www.switchboard.org.uk

LGBT religious support groups

Metropolitan Community Church
www.mccedinburgh.com
0131 226 1691

Lesbian & Gay Jewish Group
www.beit-klal-yisrael.co.uk
London 8960 5750

Gay & Lesbian Humanist Assoc
galha@bigfoot.com
01926 858 450

Quaker Lesbian & Gay Fellowship
www.qlgf.org.uk

Quest
www.quest-gaycatholic.org.uk
0800 808 0234

Muslim Women's LBT Group
www.safraproject.org

Useful websites for lesbian and bisexual women

www.stonewall.org.uk

Well established LB lobbying group worth checking out. Also has info on 'what coming out is and why it is important to come out'.

www.sistahood.org.uk

North East England lesbian & bisexual site.

www.gingerbeer.co.uk

London's leading website for lesbians and bisexual women.

www.pinkparents.org.uk

Advice, information and support on all aspects of lesbian, gay and bisexual parenting and becoming a parent.

www.lesbianinformationservice.org

Links to publications and research on various lesbian topics.

www.lesbianlife.about.com

Various articles, resources and links from dating to health issues.

For coming out information:

www.avert.org/comingoutstories.htm

UK based international HIV agency

www.comingoutstories.com

A US based website to post stories about coming-out.

www.comeout.org

US coming out site. Also includes information about 'national coming out day'.

Safer Sex

<http://www.fenwayhealth.org/publicat/safersexbi.pdf>

- safer sex leaflet for bisexuals and their partners

Lesbian Sex, produced by Lothian Lesbian Line, 0131 557 0751

Sappho@Sandyford - Lesbian Sexual Health Clinic 0141 221 8130

Civil Registration

The Civil Registration Act creates a new legal relationship, which a same sex couple can form by signing a registration document. It provides couples in a civil partnership with parity of treatment in a wide range of legal matters with those opposite sex couples who enter into a civil marriage.

Dental Dam

A dental dam is a small sheet of latex, which acts as a barrier between the vagina or anus and the mouth. Dental dams get their name because they are used during dental surgery.

Dyke

The term preferred by some, but not all, lesbians, esp. younger women.

Gay

Most commonly used by men but also used by some lesbians.

Homophobia

An irrational fear and dislike of lesbian, gay and bisexual people, which can lead to hatred resulting in verbal and physical attacks and abuse.

LGBT

Lesbian, gay, bisexual & transgender.

The Scene

Gay run or gay friendly bars, cafes & clubs.

Transgender

Transgender is an inclusive, umbrella term used to describe the diversity of gender identity and gender expression. The term can be used to describe all people who do not conform to common ideas of gender roles, including transsexuals & transvestites.

Transsexual

Transsexual is a term used to describe people who are born into the wrong physical sex, this includes pre-operative, post-operative and non-operative female-to-male (FTM) and male-to-female (MTF) transsexuals.

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A VERY BIG THANK-YOU TO ALL OUR CONTRIBUTORS