

Bisexuality Basics

UC Riverside LGBT Resource Center
245 Costo Hall • www.out.ucr.edu
(951) 827-2267 • out@ucr.edu

What Is Bisexuality?

Bisexuality is the potential to feel attracted (sexually, romantically, emotionally) to and to engage in sensual or sexual relationships with people of either sex. A bisexual person may not be equally attracted to both sexes, and the degree of attraction may vary over time.

Self-perception is the key to a bisexual identity. Many people engage in sexual activity with people of both sexes, yet do not identify as bisexual. Likewise, other people engage in sexual relations only with people of one sex, or do not engage in sexual activity at all, yet consider themselves bisexual. There is no behavioral "test" to determine whether or not one is bisexual.

Bisexual Identity

Some people believe that a person is born heterosexual, homosexual, or bisexual (for instance due to prenatal hormonal influences), and that their identity is inherent and unchangeable. Others believe that sexual orientation is due to socialization (for example either imitating or rejecting parental models) or conscious choice (for example, choosing lesbianism as part of a political feminist identity). Others believe that these factors interact. Because biological, social, and cultural factors are different for each person, everyone's sexuality is highly individual, whether they are bisexual, gay or lesbian, heterosexual, or asexual. The "value" placed on a sexual identity should not depend on its origin. Many people assume that bisexuality is just a phase people go through. In fact, any sexual orientation can be a phase.

Humans are diverse, and individual sexual feelings and behavior change over time. The creation and consolidation of a sexual identity is an ongoing process. Since we are generally socialized as heterosexuals, bisexuality is a stage that many people experience as part of the process of acknowledging their homosexuality. Many others come to identify as bisexuals after a considerable period of identification as gay men or lesbians.

A recent study by Ron Fox of more than 900 bisexual individuals found that 1/3 had previously identified as lesbian or gay. An orientation that may not be permanent is still valid for the period of time it is experienced. Bisexuality, like homosexuality and heterosexuality, may be either a transitional step in the process of sexual discovery, or a stable, long-term identity.

How Common Is Bisexuality?

It is not easy to say how common bisexuality is, since little research has been done on this subject; most studies on sexuality have focused on heterosexuals or homosexuals. Based on research done by Kinsey in the 1940s and 1950s, as many as 15-25% of women and 33-46% of men may be bisexual, based on their activities or attractions. Bisexuals are in many ways a hidden population. In our culture, it is generally assumed that a person is either heterosexual (the default assumption) or homosexual (based on appearance or behavioral clues.) Because bisexuality does not fit into these standard categories, it is often denied or ignored.

When it is recognized, bisexuality is often viewed as being "part heterosexual and part homosexual," rather than being a unique identity. Bisexuality threatens the accepted way of looking at the world by calling into question the validity of rigid sexual categories, and encourages acknowledgment of the existence of a diverse range of sexuality. Since there is not a stereotypical bisexual appearance or way of acting, bisexuals are usually assumed to be either heterosexual or homosexual. In order to increase awareness, bisexuals have begun to create their own visible communities.

Bisexual Relationships

Bisexuals, like all people, have a wide variety of relationship styles. Contrary to common myth, a bisexual person does not need to be sexually involved with both a man and a woman simultaneously. In fact, some people who identify as bisexual never engage in sexual activity with one or the other (or either) gender. As is the case for heterosexuals and gay men and lesbians, attraction does not involve acting on every desire. Like heterosexuals and gay people, many bisexuals choose to be sexually active with one partner only, and have long-term, monogamous relationships. Other bisexuals may have open marriages that allow for relationships with same-sex partners, three-way relationships, or a number of partners of the same or other gender (singly or simultaneously). It is important to have the freedom to choose the type of sexual and affectional relationships that are right for the people involved, whatever their orientation.

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Biphobia

Bisexual women and men cannot be defined by their partner or potential partner, so are rendered invisible within the either/or heterosexist framework. This invisibility (biphobia) is one of the most challenging aspects of a bisexual identity. Living in a society that is based and thrives on opposition, on the reassurances and "balanced" polarities of dichotomy, affects how we see the world, and how we negotiate our own and other peoples lives to fit "reality."

Most people are unaware of their homosexual or heterosexual assumptions until a bisexual speaks up/comes out and challenges the assumption. Very often bisexuals are then dismissed, and told they are "confused" and "simply have to make up their mind and choose." For bisexually identified people to maintain their integrity in a homo-hating heterosexist society, they must have a strong sense of self, and the courage and conviction to live their lives in defiance of what passes for "normal."

What Does Biphobia Look Like?

- Assuming that everyone you meet is either heterosexual or homosexual.
- Supporting and understanding a bisexual identity for young people because you identified "that way" before you came to your "real" lesbian/gay/heterosexual identity.
- Expecting a bisexual to identify as heterosexual when coupled with the "opposite" gender/sex.
- Believing bisexual men spread AIDS/HIV and other STDs to heterosexuals.
- Thinking bisexual people haven't made up their minds.
- Assuming a bisexual person would want to fulfill your sexual fantasies or curiosities.
- Assuming bisexuals would be willing to "pass" as anything other than bisexual.
- Feeling that bisexual people are too outspoken and pushy about their visibility and rights.
- Automatically assuming romantic couplings of two women are lesbian, or two men are gay, or a man and a woman are heterosexual.
- Expecting bisexual people to get services, information and education from heterosexual service agencies for their "heterosexual side" and then go to gay and/or lesbian service agencies for their "homosexual side" (sic).
- Feeling bisexuals just want to have their cake and eat it too.
- Believing that bisexual women spread AIDS/HIV and other STDs to lesbians.
- Using the terms "phase" or "stage" or "confused" or "fence-sitter" or "bisexual" or "AC/DC" or "switchhitter" as slurs or in an accusatory way.
- Thinking bisexuals only have committed relationships with "opposite" sex/gender partners.
- Looking at a bisexual person and automatically thinking of their sexuality rather than seeing them as a whole, complete person.
- Believing bisexuals are confused about their sexuality.
- Assuming that bisexuals, if given the choice, would prefer to be within an "opposite" gender/sex coupling to reap the social benefits of a "heterosexual" pairing.
- Not confronting a biphobic remark or joke for fear of being identified as bisexual.
- Assuming bisexual means "available."
- Thinking that bisexual people will have their rights when lesbian and gay people win theirs.
- Being gay or lesbian and asking your bisexual friend about their lover only when that lover is the same sex/gender.
- Feeling that you can't trust a bisexual because they aren't really gay or lesbian, or aren't really heterosexual.
- Thinking that people identify as bisexual because it's "trendy."
- Expecting a bisexual to identify as gay or lesbian when coupled with the "same" sex/gender.
- Expecting bisexual activists and organizers to minimize bisexual issues (i.e. HIV/AIDS, violence, basic civil rights, fighting the Right, military, same sex marriage, child custody, adoption, etc.) and to prioritize the visibility of "lesbian and/or gay" issues.
- Avoid mentioning to friends that you are involved with a bisexual or working with a bisexual group because you are afraid they will think you are a bisexual.

Publications

- Bi Any Other Name: Bisexual People Speak Out by Loraine Hutchins and Lani Kaahumanu, Eds.
- Bisexual Politics: Theories, Queries, & Visions by Naomi Tucker, Ed.
- Getting Bi: Voices of Bisexuals Around the World by Robyn Ochs and Sarah Rowley, Eds.

Web Resources - <http://www.biresource.org>