

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 that 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, 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.

• 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, 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 gay 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 another hotline. There are alternatives to denying your very valuable feelings. Check out the resources listed on the back of this brochure.

• 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."

John, 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 to 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 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 hatemongers have to say; it's only so much hot air. Stay proud and confident!"

John, age 17

At Newton North there are a number of people who will be understanding and supportive. You can talk to them with the confidence that you will find respect and acceptance. Of course what you say will be kept in confidence. Your counselor and all other members of the Counseling Department are very willing to listen. In addition many faculty members have joined Bridges, a faculty/student group devoted to eliminating homophobia and making our school a more accepting place. They are also willing to be of help to you. Their names and room numbers are listed on the bulletin board outside the Counseling Office (332-3). Please feel free to contact any one of them.

• 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.

Sex should only happen between mature individuals who care about each other. You will know when the time is right. 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).

• Books

The following books can give you additional information about being gay. Some of these books may be in your public library. If you feel comfortable, ask the librarian in the "young

adult" section of the library. Librarians are usually glad to help. If the librarian can't help you, try the "Gay" section of a large bookstore. If that doesn't help, you might want to order books and other materials through the mail. If you're not having any luck at all, try calling one of the hotlines listed below or looking for a local gay organization.

One Teenager in Ten: Writings by Gay and Lesbian Youth, ed. Ann Heron, Alyson Publications, 40 Plympton Street, Boston, MA 02118 (1983).

Beyond Acceptance: Parents of Lesbian and Gay Children Talk About Their Experiences, Griffin, Wirth and Wirth, Prentice-Hall, 1986.

Looking at Gay and Lesbian Life, Warren Blumenfeld and Diane Raymond, Beacon Press (1988).

How To Be a Happy Homosexual, Terry Sanderson, Alyson Publications (1990). This book is published in England but is distributed by Alyson.

Tales of the Closet, (comic books about being gay), Ivan Velez, Hetrick-Martin Institute for the Protection of Lesbian and Gay Youth, 401 West Street, New York, NY 10014.

• Toll-free Hotlines

You may want to call a hotline to speak to someone about being gay. You may want to call from a phone booth for privacy. The people at the hotline 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.

These hotline numbers are accurate as of August 1990 and are toll-free from anywhere in the United States. Hotlines sometimes change. If these don't work, try looking in a phone book. Most major cities have a lesbian and gay hotline.

National Lesbian and Gay Hotline:
1-800-SOS-GAYS

National AIDS Hotline: 1-800-342-AIDS

National Runaway Switchboard:
1-800-621-4000

• Local Gay Organizations

Check the white pages of your telephone book under "gay" or "lesbian". Especially look for hotlines, counseling agencies and youth groups.

Printing of this brochure was funded by a grant from the Newton Human Rights Commission.

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

Produced and distributed by The Campaign to End Homophobia. The Campaign is a network of people who work to end homophobia through information sharing and education which celebrates diversity, promotes love and support, and provides alternatives to oppression.

Rather than distributing pamphlets in bulk, we provide single, camera-ready copies so that users can customize, reproduce and distribute the pamphlets in whatever way is most effective for them. We ask for a contribution of \$25 from organizations and \$10 from individuals for camera-ready copy and permission to reprint the pamphlets for young lesbians and young gay men.

Write to us at The Campaign to End Homophobia, P.O. Box 819, Cambridge, MA 02139, for copies of both pamphlets and information about the Campaign and other resources we distribute.