

**I THINK I MIGHT BE A LESBIAN ... NOW
WHAT DO I DO?**

A Brochure for Young Women

Information written by lesbian youth
for lesbian youth and young women
questioning their sexuality

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE A LESBIAN?

Lesbians are women-loving-women. We are women who are sexually attracted to other women. We are women who may feel emotionally and spiritually closer to women. We are women who prefer women as our partners.

As lesbians, we are not alone. One out of ten teenagers is lesbian or gay. Many famous women in history were lesbians. Lesbians are teachers, doctors, lawyers, factory workers, police officers, politicians, ministers, movie stars, artists, mothers, nuns, truck drivers, models, novelists. You name it, we do it.

Lesbians are White, Black, Asian, Hispanic, Native American, Jewish, Catholic, Protestant, Buddhist. Lesbians are rich, poor, working class, and middle class. Some lesbians are in heterosexual marriages. Some lesbians are disabled. Lesbians are young women and old women. You name it, we are it.

Lesbians live in cities and in the country. We are everywhere.

HOW DO I KNOW IF I'M A LESBIAN?

"When I was young I always wanted to grow up and live with my best girlfriend, and that feeling never changed as I got older"--Tammy, age 17.

"When we're really young, we have crushes on girls, but then we're supposed to grow out of it. We're supposed to read books about how girl meets boy and boy meets girl. Well, I'd never finish those books" -- Terryle, age 16.

During adolescence, most young women begin to be aware of sexual feelings and take an interest in dating. Many young women feel physically attracted to men. But many other young women feel physically attracted to other women.

You may notice that you feel turned on by other women. You may feel different from your girlfriends, like you don't fit in sometimes. When your girlfriends are checking out boys, you may find yourself checking out girls. Going out with boys may not interest you. You may find yourself wondering, "Why aren't there any men like these terrific women I keep meeting?"

You may also feel confused or unsure about whether or not you're a lesbian. Many adults will tell us that we're too young to call ourselves gay, or that we're going through a phase, or that we don't know what we're talking about. That's their way of avoiding the fact that some of us are lesbian youth.

You may feel confused because you're attracted to both men and women. That's OK. Some women have relationships with both men and women throughout their lives. Some may later decide to be exclusively lesbian or heterosexual.

Our sexuality develops over time. Don't worry if you aren't sure.

AM I NORMAL?

"We're told that it's sick, or perverted, or sinful, or abnormal. But the people who tell us that are the same ones who say that women belong in the kitchen, and that Black people are inferior, and that handicapped people are useless. Who's to say what's normal? Some people think eating raw fish is normal, and other people think it's disgusting and abnormal"--Terryle, age 16.

"I think we're very brave to have recognized this in ourselves and to have wanted to come to terms with it"--Natalie, age 18.

Yes, you are normal. It's perfectly natural for people to be attracted to members of their own sex. But it's not something that's encouraged in our society. Many people push away these feelings because of prejudice against gay men and lesbians.

Most scientific experts agree that a person's sexual orientation is determined at a very young age, maybe even at birth.

It's normal and healthy to be yourself, whether you're gay or straight. What's really important is that we learn to like ourselves.

WHAT IS IT LIKE TO BE YOUNG AND A LESBIAN?

"I feel very powerful, special, independent, strong, and courageous" -Natalie, age 18.

"It's scary sometimes. I've felt very unsure of myself. But other times I feel wonderful and proud"--Terryle, age 16.

There's no "right" way or "wrong" way to be a lesbian. Because of society's stereotypes about lesbians that we've all grown up with, you might think you have to be a certain way if you're a lesbian. But lesbians come in all shapes and sizes, from all occupations, and with all levels of education.

Your sexual orientation is only one part of who you are. You probably have hobbies and interests that are the same as your straight friends.

Because of homophobia and prejudice, some people don't accept lesbians and gay men. Lesbians and gay men suffer from discrimination and violence. That's why there are many gay and lesbian organizations that work for gay and lesbian civil rights.

"Once I accepted myself and my sexuality, I found that I became more involved in life with my friends because I was more comfortable with myself"--Tammi, age 18.

"I feel down and depressed a lot because of the homophobia that I'm constantly up against, but then I realize that I have the power to educate other members of my generation"-- Tammy, age 17.

WHO SHOULD I TELL?

"You shouldn't feel pressured to tell anyone at all until you are comfortable with the idea of being a lesbian yourself. Be prepared that people's reactions will vary"-- Tammi, age 18.

"Only tell someone if you feel you have enough support to face what may happen. Try to tell someone if you think you can't deal with these feelings alone anymore. If you think your family might flip out, tell someone who might be more impartial"-- Sarah, age 19.

"When I told a couple of my friends, I told them I was no different now than I was five minutes before I told them, except that now I wasn't keeping a big secret from them"-- Terryle, age 16.

Coming out is the process of accepting yourself as a lesbian and figuring out how open you want to be about your sexual orientation.

Unfortunately, not everyone you know will think that being a lesbian is the greatest thing since sliced bread. It's hard to know who can handle the information and give you support. Some friends may accept you. Some may turn away from you or tell other people without your permission. Telling family can be very difficult. Some families are very supportive. But some lesbian and gay youth have been kicked out of their homes when their parents found out.

Maybe there's a guidance counsellor or social worker in your school, or in a local youth or counselling agency, that you can trust. It's important to have someone to talk to because it's not normal or healthy for young people to have to keep secret such an important part of their lives.

WHAT ABOUT SEX?

"First I would ask myself if I felt ready. Then I would talk to my partner to see if she felt ready. When you decide to have sex, it feels good when you've made the right decision. Only you can know when it is and isn't right for you to have sex" -- Tammi, age 18.

"Just because you're turned on to someone doesn't mean you're ready to have sex. You have to feel emotionally ready. It's important that the two people talk about what they like and don't like. No one should have to do something they don't want to do. There's no need to rush things. It'll come in time" -- Terryle, age 16.

Deciding whether or not to be sexual with someone is a big decision. You may feel very scared at the thought of having sex with another women. That's OK. Lots of us do, especially if it's our first time.

Women aren't encouraged in our society to talk openly about sex, but it's important that we communicate about what we like and don't like to do sexually, whether we feel ready to have sex or not, and different expectations we may have about the relationship. And it's important to talk about whether we're at risk for HIV, the virus that is thought to cause AIDS, or other sexually transmitted diseases, like herpes.

There are many ways that lesbians can be sexual with each other. We can give each other pleasure by holding, kissing, hugging, stroking, stimulating each other's genitals with our tongues and hands, inserting our fingers into each other's vaginas, rubbing our bodies together to stimulate each other, and anything else we want to do. We can use our imaginations!

DO I HAVE TO WORRY ABOUT AIDS?

All of us should know about HIV, the virus believed to be the cause of AIDS -- how it's transmitted and how we can prevent ourselves from becoming infected. You and your partner should discuss your risk factors for HIV infection and decide what, if any, safer sex methods you should use.

Lesbians who are at risk are those who:

- Share needles if using IV drugs.
- Have vaginal intercourse with men without using condoms. (It's fairly common for young lesbians to occasionally have sexual contact with men.)
- Have oral sex with an infected women without the use of a barrier to protect against infected vaginal secretions or menstrual blood.

Safer sex for lesbians includes:

- Use of a dental dam for oral-vaginal and oral-anal stimulation. A dental dam is a piece of latex about 5 inches square designed for use in dental surgery. They are available at dental or medical supply stores.
- Use of surgical gloves when sticking your fingers into your partner's vagina or ass, especially if you have tiny cuts or rashes on your hands.
- And all the other wonderful things that lesbians do together.

HOW DO WE LEARN TO LIKE OURSELVES?

"It's important that we don't deny our feelings. If we be who we truly want to be in our hearts, we can be surprised at how happy we can be. And we should think a lot about all our positive points, and being a lesbian is very positive" -- Rebecca, age 16.

"It helps me to interact with people who make me feel happy and good about myself. And I try to do things I feel good about doing" -Sarah, age 19.

All people have a right to feel good about themselves. We're all valuable human beings. Developing self-esteem is very important for young people. It's hard for gay and lesbian youth to feel good about ourselves because all around us are people who believe that we're sick, or perverted, or destined to live very unhappy lives.

When we feel like we have to hide who we really are, it can make us feel like hurting ourselves, like through alcohol, drugs, or suicide. We may feel very isolated, fearful, and depressed, especially if we've had no one to talk to about the fact that we're lesbians.

More and more, we, as young lesbians, are learning to like who we are. It helps to read good books about lesbians -- books that have accurate information in them and that are written about lesbians who are leading very fulfilling lives. It also helps to meet other lesbians because then we find out that lesbians are as diverse as any other group of people and that we've been told a lot of lies by our society.

It can help to say to yourself every day, "I'm a lesbian and I'm OK." And try to find someone to talk to who also believes that lesbians are OK. Remember: it's normal and natural to be a lesbian, just like it's normal and natural for some people to be heterosexual.

HOW CAN I MEET OTHER LESBIANS?

"There are many lesbians around you, but you don't know they're lesbians, just as they don't know that you're a lesbian. Don't lose hope. You'll eventually meet some" -- Sarah, age 19.

- Make contact with local feminist organizations like the National Organization for Women (NOW).
- Many colleges and universities have campus gay, lesbian, and feminist organizations.
- Check your phone book for a local hotline and ask for the gay and lesbian organizations in your area. There might even be a gay/lesbian youth group in your area.
- Look for a gay/lesbian or feminist newspaper in your area. Check local bookstores, health food stores, and gay bars for copies.
- Contact the resources listed on the back of this brochure.

This brochure was written by Tammy, Tammi, Terryle, Camelia, Michelle, Natalie, Rebecca, and Sarah, members of OUTRIGHT, the Portland, Maine, Alliance of Lesbian and Gay Youth, with help from Diane, their advisor.

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