

What if



I'm gay!

What if I'm gay?

A coming out guide



Sayoni 

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Sayoni is a community and advocacy group based in Singapore for lesbian, bisexual and transsexual Asian women.

Founded by a group of women from diverse backgrounds, ages, economic status and races, Sayoni aims to empower queer women with a two-pronged approach to encourage dialogue within the queer community and to educate by informing the public. Sayoni's vision is to empower queer women towards greater involvement and presence in the community.

www.sayoni.com



"I've always dreamed of getting married. Not just for the white dress, the flowers, the dancing till the wee hours of the morning, but for more than that. I've dreamed of marrying the one that I love in the company of my closest friends and family with their love and support. I've dreamed of waking up every day confident in the presence of my lover in my life. I've dreamed of sharing my dreams and my hopes with this woman, as she shares hers with me, of sharing a home, of starting a family and watching it grow."

Dominique



For those who need courage,
this book is dedicated to you.

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When I first realized that I was attracted to women, I thought I was either bisexual or undergoing a passing phase. So I dated men for a long while before finally dating women. It was a tiring questioning process but I found relationships with women more fulfilling and satisfying.

I finally figured I was gay.

The revelation in and of itself was not terrifying. The outcome of that revelation, thinking about how to tell my parents and friends in order to live authentically, and how to address negative stereotypes of gay people, was to be reckoned with. If only there were a legitimate course I could take, like CO1101: Introduction to Coming Out, to find out more!

This aspiration has come to fruition in this coming out guide. If you are struggling with same-sex attraction, you are the person we hope to reach. This guide addresses the questions you may have. It also prepares you for common misconceptions about same-sex attractions and gay people, and how you can respond to them.

Another important objective of this guide is to present credible facts on sexual orientation and relevant topics. This emanated from events in the past few years, such as the abuse of research to justify prejudice against gay people.

We cannot rely on information per se. We need to critique the information that we receive, even from sources that are traditionally associated with accuracy and reliability. It is my hope that you will be sufficiently intrigued to find out more.

I hope you will find this guide helpful in your process of coming out. May your journey of coming out to yourself and others then be a gentler ride.

Acknowledgement

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Lastly, to the Sayoni team for their support.

*Anj Ho
anj@sayoni.com*

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Preface

Am I gay?

I always thought of myself as a normal person. I'm a daughter, sister, classmate, colleague and I treasure my relationships in my family, school and at work. I dream of getting a good career and want to have a good future. As early as my teenage days, however, I started doubting that people would treat me as a normal person and wondered if I could have a normal, happy life.

When I was in secondary school, I grew close to my senior, Amanda. She was a prefect, the chairperson of her CCA and had good grades. We wrote letters to each other, but grew distant after we became busy with school. I missed her a lot and often wondered why. I guessed that it was because I admired her for her academic abilities and for her popularity in school.

After graduation, I did not see her for years because she moved to another school. I realized that I still missed her. I thought about my other romantic attractions; they were only attractions to girls and not to boys.

By then, I had heard of the words "gay" and "lesbian" from my friends, often used as insults. I looked up the meaning of these words, and realized that "lesbian" simply meant being attracted to women. It was then that I found a word to describe myself, but soon I became scared that my family, classmates, colleagues and friends would call me "sick", "mentally ill" or a "sinner", and hate me because of that.

Natasha

Who's gay?

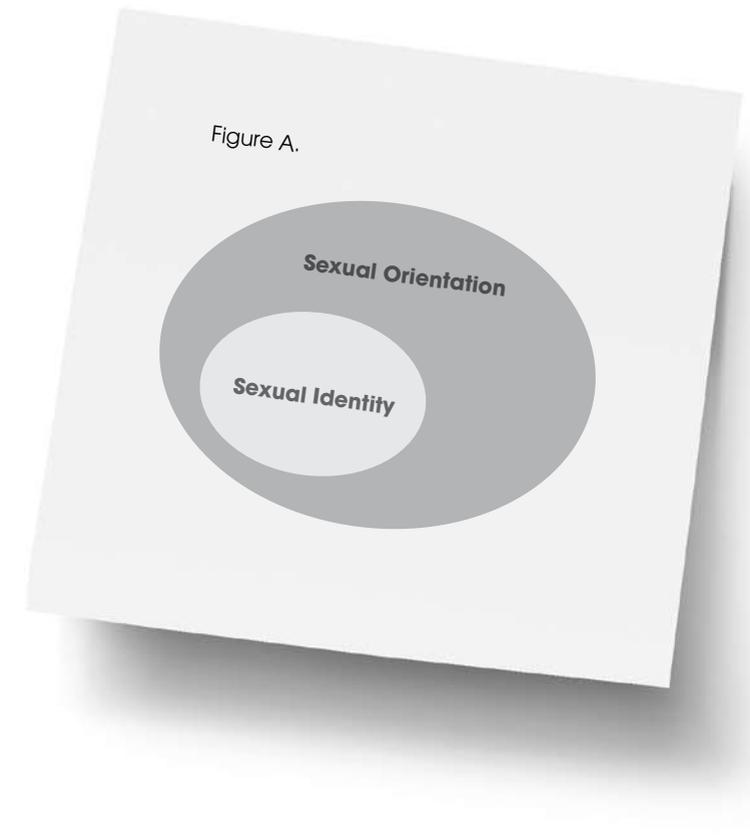
We think a person is gay when they are in a relationship with someone of the same sex. However, having same-sex partners does not mean a person is gay. Such people may be exploring their sexual orientation.

We may also think a person is gay when they claim to be so, that is, they identify as gay. However, some people also take on sexual identities that may not be consistent with their sexual orientation. This can happen when a person defines sexual orientation inaccurately. This equating of sexual identity with sexual orientation results in the misconception that sexual orientation is flexible.

So what is sexual orientation?

Sexual orientation includes sexual identity (refer to figure A), sexual attraction and sexual behavior. It is determined by one's enduring sexual and/or emotional attractions (1). It includes:

- Preferred characteristics of sexual partners (aspects such as physical, emotional and intellectual)
- Modes of sexual expression (e.g., eye movements, touching)
- Preferred sexual activities (e.g., hand-holding, kissing, sexual intercourse)



Sometimes, our preferences are not consistent. For instance, we may be physically attracted to members of the same sex and yet seem to get along better with members of the opposite sex. We may find it difficult to call ourselves “lesbian”, “gay”, “bisexual” or “straight” and may be confused as to what these labels mean.

However, labels are not essential to psychological health. Awareness and acceptance of our same-sex attractions are far more important (2).

Common terms

Same-sex attraction:

Having same-sex attraction means you are physically and/or romantically attracted to persons of the same sex. Many people discover their same-sex attractions when they develop crushes or have a sexual experience with a member of the same sex.

Bisexuality:

You are bisexual if you experience physical and romantic attraction towards members of both sexes.

Homosexuality:

You are gay if you experience physical and romantic attraction only towards members of the same sex.

Queer:

Queer is an umbrella term for individuals whose sexuality and/or gender do not fall into the mainstream mold.

Gender:

Gender refers to socially constructed roles, behavior and attributes for women and men.

Sex:

Sex refers to the physiological characteristics of a person, i.e., their anatomy.

Myths

"It took me a long while to accept my sexual orientation, because I am not a promiscuous nor a psychotic person."

Santhi

Myths

Myths

Myth,

n. 2. a. A widespread but untrue or erroneous story or belief; a widely held misconception; a misrepresentation of the truth.

The Oxford English Dictionary, 2008

Are homosexual women and men mentally ill?



The American Psychiatric Association (APA) removed homosexuality from the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-II) in 1973, as homosexuality does not fulfill the criteria of psychiatric disorder: it does not cause "regular subjective distress" nor is it "associated with some generalized impairment in social effectiveness or functioning" (3).

However, there are some mental health professionals who continue to regard homosexuality as an abnormality which requires correction. Controversy surrounding homosexuality tends to be based on moral judgments and science is used or misused to justify them (4, 5). This is despite the Resolution on Appropriate Therapeutic Responses to Sexual Orientation adopted by the APA in 1998, stating that psychologists, psychiatrists or other mental health service providers should not "make false or deceptive statements concerning... the scientific or clinical basis for... their services".

Is homosexuality abnormal? What is normality?

Laypeople tend to use “abnormal” to denote “bad”, “sick” or “unacceptable”. Let us look at some of the definitions that have been used to define “normal”.

1. High frequency = normal, Low frequency = abnormal

This means whatever occurs most frequently in the population is seen as normal and behavior that occurs least frequently is perceived as abnormal.

Problems with equating frequency with normality: Ethnic and racial minorities would then be deemed “abnormal”. If you have quirks (e.g., you like to eat peanut butter in Chinese soup or you have a body covered with tattoos), you would then be considered “abnormal”.

2. Discomfort, deviance and dysfunction = abnormal

“Discomfort” refers to physical or psychological discomfort. Examples of physical discomforts are asthma, nausea and bodily pains. Examples of psychological discomforts are anxiety and depression.

Problems with this criterion of “discomfort”: Misguided mental health service providers may tell you that you are depressed and anxious because you are gay – this is untrue. You may feel depressed or anxious due to stress from people in your social spheres (e.g., colleagues) who are not accepting of your sexual orientation. In fact, the root cause of such depression and anxiety is homophobia. On the contrary, gay people do have happy and fulfilling lives.

“Deviance” refers to bizarre or unusual behavior that is a deviation from an accepted standard of behavior due to a false perception of reality (e.g., hallucination).

Problems with “deviance” criteria: The definition of “deviance” is subjective and depends on the personal values of the mental health service providers. Secondly, social norms and values change over time. For example, inter-racial marriages were considered immoral by the church in the United States about 50 years ago. Today, it is no longer the case. 200 years ago, women

were considered second class citizens who should not receive an education. Today, women attend school, develop careers and contribute to society.

“Dysfunction” refers to loss of efficiency in performing the responsibilities and duties of a role. Examples of the roles we play are: parents, partners, colleagues and friends, etc.

There are currently no known problems with the “dysfunction” definition of poor mental health.

3. Current views = normal

Individuals are deemed mentally unsound if their behaviors or beliefs violate the prevailing conventions. For example, when slavery was legal, slaves who tried to escape were diagnosed with "drapetomania", which was defined as the sickness that makes people desire freedom.

Problem: There is no room for new perspectives and information if we are boxed in by our current views. Women would continue to be subjugated and confined to the domestic sphere, unable to study or vote.

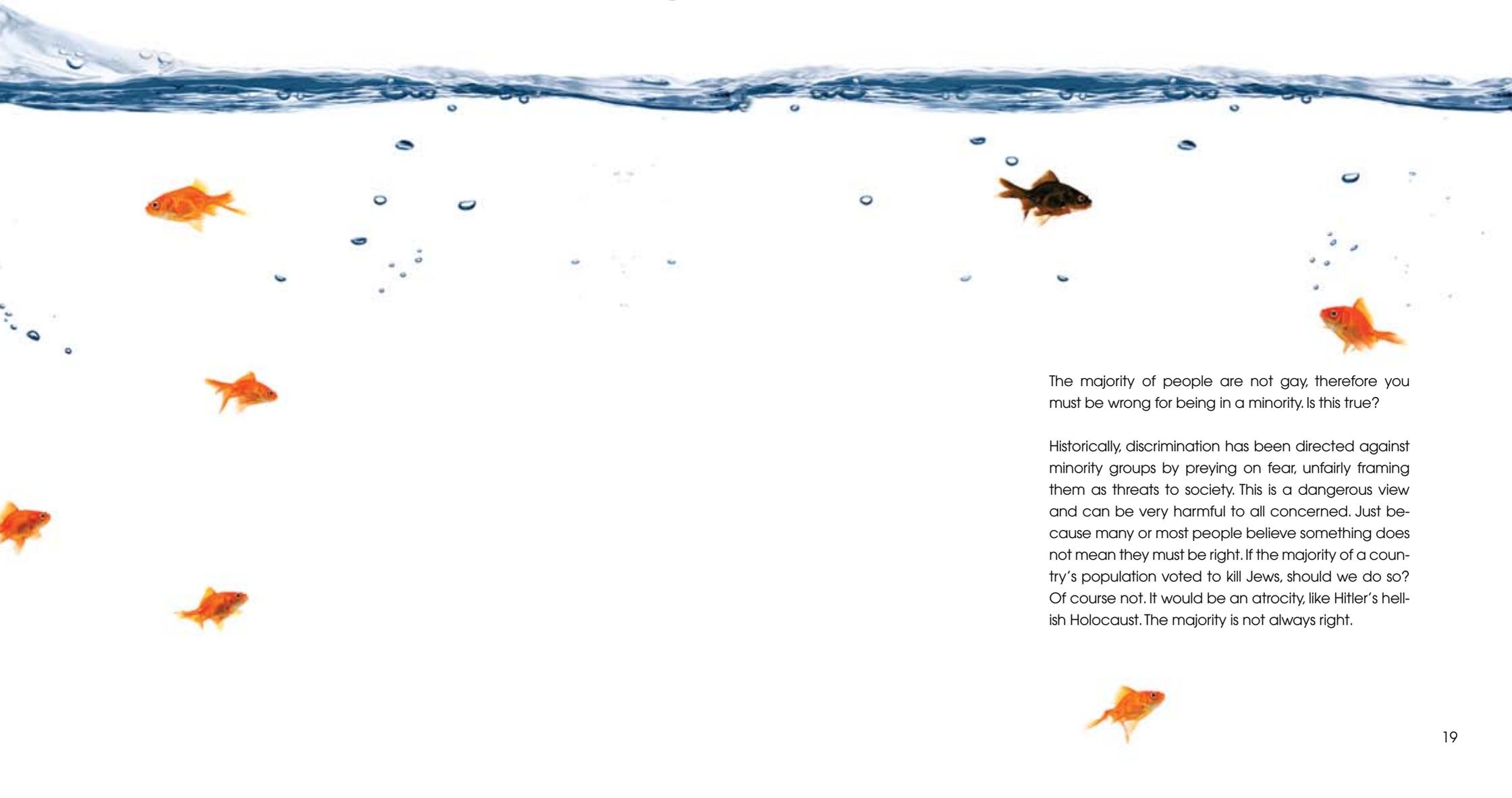
4. Mental health professionals define "normal"

This means that health professionals decide whether or not you are mentally ill. A person who is mentally sound is considered "normal".

Problems: Mental health professionals (e.g., counselors) may be biased and may not provide current, publicly available information which contradicts their personal values. Counselors may have outdated knowledge and may not be aware of appropriate therapies. They may also be unqualified to treat your specific condition. The most accurate information about sexual orientation may be from the APA.

Homosexuality is not the problem causing your misery, depression and anxiety. Gay persons in supportive environments do not suffer misery, depression and anxiety relating to their sexuality. If you are not functioning well, get help. Find out about the therapies available from gay-friendly agencies. Equip yourself with information.

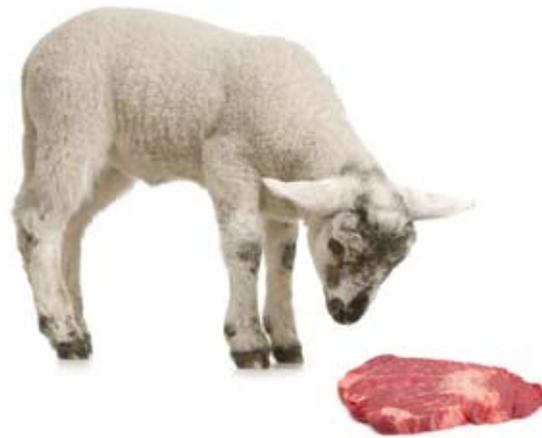
Majority = right; Minority = wrong



The majority of people are not gay, therefore you must be wrong for being in a minority. Is this true?

Historically, discrimination has been directed against minority groups by preying on fear, unfairly framing them as threats to society. This is a dangerous view and can be very harmful to all concerned. Just because many or most people believe something does not mean they must be right. If the majority of a country's population voted to kill Jews, should we do so? Of course not. It would be an atrocity, like Hitler's hellish Holocaust. The majority is not always right.

Reparative/ conversion therapy: does it work?



Reparative therapy is any kind of psychotherapeutic cure with the aim of changing a person's sexual orientation. It is based on the assumptions that homosexuality is a mental disorder and that a queer person should and can change her/his sexual orientation. Such therapies are often imposed on a person through family, religious or social coercion or as a result of ignorance about homosexuality (6). They may be imposed with good intentions, under the guise of counseling.

Some methods used in reparative therapy include electric shocks, surgery (e.g., cauterization of the spinal cord, clitoridectomy, castration, ovary removal etc.),

hormone therapy (e.g., radiation or steroids), masturbatory reconditioning, prayer and spiritual interventions (e.g., exorcism). Unsuccessful converts may experience increased depression, increased self-hatred, suicidal tendencies, increased misperceptions about homosexuality, internalized homophobia, lower self-esteem, increased negative affect (feelings) towards parents, sexual dysfunction and intimacy avoidance, delayed identity development, loneliness, fear of being a child-abuser, loss of faith etc (7).

Evidence shows that conditioning of sexual arousal is ineffective and that significant change towards a particular sexual orientation is difficult if it is contrary to one's established sexual orientation (8). "Successful" converts are made up of two groups: those who engage in heterosexual relationships and those who become celibate. The ability of reparative therapy to permanently and truly change a person's sexual orientation remains unproven (9). Therapy based on incorrect information or misrepresentations of scientific studies or religious texts can do more harm than good for the self-esteem and mental health of a queer person.

Gay-affirmative therapy is essential for queer people who require psychological help with issues related to their sexual orientation, including social, institutional, workplace or religious discrimination. Gay-affirmative therapy dispels untruths about societal messages, helps the client in the identity development process, and addresses issues such as coming out, relationships, career and family.

For the religious queer person, however, it is not enough to address only identity formation (10). They may wish to reconcile the values of their faith with their sexual orientation. As there are differing interpretations of religious texts and teachings, it may then help to understand various perspectives and analyze their origins, validity and accuracy.

Are gay relationships doomed to fail?



A relationship should be based on positive qualities such as mutual trust, respect, equality and love. These qualities are common to both same-sex and opposite-sex relationships. Both same-sex and opposite-sex couples experience conflict. There is evidence that straight and gay couples have similar communication patterns and effects (13) and that relationship quality depends on factors such as stage of relationship, high attachment to each other and shared decision-making, not sexual orientation (14, 15). Sexual orientation also does not appear to affect relationship satisfaction and several studies have concluded that relationship satisfaction does not differ between lesbian, gay and heterosexual couples (13, 14, 16).

Romantic relationships thrive in an affirmative environment and with support from family, friends, colleagues and society. However, many people in same-sex relationships experience homophobia (17). Under such stress, same-sex couples find it more challenging to sustain their relationship and may face pressures to break up or to enter heterosexual relationships.

Even though social and institutional support for same-sex relationships may be lacking or unavailable, same-sex relationships endure. In countries where same-sex marriage or unions are recognized by law, such as Brazil, Canada, South Africa and Mexico, same-sex couples enjoy similar benefits to heterosexual couples. There are many gay men and lesbian women in long-lasting cohabiting relationships (11). Many have gone on to become parents, and researchers are examining the benefits of same-sex marriage on their children (12).

Is AIDS a gay disease?

Homosexuality is not the cause of AIDS. Straight people get AIDS too. Whether you are straight or gay, having sex responsibly is the key to protecting yourself from sexually transmitted infections (STIs). For instance, use protective barriers (e.g., condoms or dental dams) to minimize the risk of STIs.

Relevant to this is the perception of lesbian immunity, where lesbian women see themselves as safe from STIs. Although there are currently no official cases of lesbian women contracting STIs in Singapore, exposure to mucous membranes, vaginal secretions, and menstrual blood can increase one's risk of STIs (18, 19). Always act responsibly to protect yourself and others.

Are all
gay men
“sissies” and
all lesbian
women
“tomboys”?

Gay people, both men and women, fall into a continuum of gender expression. There are many masculine gay men, feminine lesbian women and a whole spectrum in between. Some are less “visible” because the way they dress and behave conform to social conventions.

Is homosexuality unnatural?

Same-sex behavior has been found in 1500 species of animals, out of which 500 were documented extensively (20), examples being lions, penguins, killer whales, dolphins, ostriches and baboons. Researchers suggest that these animals may engage in same-sex behavior for many reasons, such as to diffuse social tensions, form social bonds, sustain fecundity or for pleasure (20, 21). Some of these animals were found with fostered offspring. The presence of same-sex coupling in the animal kingdom shows that homosexuality is part of nature.

Another common misperception is thinking that homosexuality is learnt. In fact, many gay people discovered that they were different from others at a very young age, as young as 5 years of age. They did not understand and were unable to put a name to what they experienced then. They only came to identify these feelings after they acquired an in-depth knowledge of sexuality. Some people might live their entire lives without acknowledging their feelings.

Was homosexuality imported from the West? Is it a Western idea?



Virtually every civilization has some record of homosexuality, including countries in the East. Same-sex relations have been discussed in Chinese literature, such as the story of Mizi Xia, the story of Pan Zhang and the story of Lord Long Yang. In China's Han dynasty alone, there were 10 openly bisexual or gay emperors; most famously, Emperor Ai had a lover named Dong Xian. Other prominent figures in later periods also had openly gay relationships.

Same-sex love was documented in ancient India too. There is evidence of male homoerotic subcultures in medieval Indian cities. Temple sculptures at Khajuraho and Konarak depict same-sex sexual activity, providing evidence of its existence in times past.

In fact, it is homophobia that is a Western import. The colonization of India and the subsequent creation of the Indian Penal Code saw the drafters translate their Victorian prejudices into law by including section 377 which criminalized "unnatural sex" of all kinds, including gay sex. (The High Court of India has since decriminalized consensual, non-vaginal sex acts between adults in July 2009.) The Indian Penal Code was adopted in many British colonies including Singapore, which did not have any homophobic leanings until then. In Singapore, British legislators added s377A into the Penal Code for the purpose of criminalizing sex acts between men.

How to spot myths

Anti-gay groups manipulate research articles and expert opinion to support their agenda, spreading disinformation, half-truths and sometimes, outright lies. If possible, read the studies to verify them and always apply critical thinking.

The following are common ways by which people may be hoodwinked.

1. Use of “expert” titles

People tend to assume that persons with the titles of Dr. and Prof. are more credible. However, we should note that professors are only experts in their own fields. A Physics professor, for instance, is unlikely to be an expert in policy-making. Therefore, comments on public policy-making from a Physics professor can be the equivalent of a layperson's. Even a person with a doctorate (PhD) in the relevant field may not have kept up with recent developments and research in their field.

2. Over-generalization

Here is an example: A researcher goes to an ex-gay ministry to interview ex-gays. His results seem to show that these ex-gays benefited from reparative/conversion therapy, e.g., a study by Spitzer (22). Can we then generalize that result to all gay people, saying that all gay people should go through conversion therapy? We cannot, because those he studied were probably unhappy to begin with; psychologically healthy gay people would not have attended such therapy.

This error of over-generalization is also common with studies done by counselors. There are heterosexuals who seek help from mental health professionals, yet we do not say that all heterosexuals are malfunctioning. Similarly, we cannot say that gay people who seek help from mental health professionals are representative of the gay community. Therefore, when you see a study being cited, it is important to know who the participants in these studies are.

3. Confusing causality with correlation

People commonly assume that if two things seem to be related, one must have caused the other. This is untrue (25). For instance, ice-cream sales increase when there is an increase in shark attacks and decrease when there are fewer shark attacks. But it is not the increase in shark attacks that causes the increase in sales. It is the increase in the number of beachgoers that leads to an increase in ice-cream sales. The correlation between ice-cream sales and shark attacks should not be confused for causality.

Similarly, studies show that gay people are likely to be more depressed than straight people. However, this does not mean that sexual orientation causes depression. Other factors such as level of social integration and support, and the experiences of hate speech and physical victimization are at play (26-28). There are many happy gay people around.

4. Taking quotes out of context

Sometimes quotes are deliberately misused to support otherwise unbelievable statements. This is unethical and can adversely affect the author's reputation, in addition to misleading readers. For example, an anti-gay booklet said that gay men actually want to contract HIV as a form of eroticism, citing a 1997 Newsweek article: "Hard as it may be to understand, some gay men have unsafe sex because they want to get HIV - or at least skate close to the edge. Danger can be erotic, even the threat of contracting a deadly disease" (29). The booklet fails to clarify that these thrill-seekers constitute a minority of the gay community. To imply that all gay men actually want to contract HIV is an absurd allegation by any standard. Therefore, apply critical thinking when reading studies.

Coming Out

"I first suspected that I was gay when I was about 10 years old, before I even knew that gay meant homosexual. Not that it mattered - I had no idea what a homosexual was either. Later, as I reached puberty, I found out what a homosexual was, at least what mainstream society thought a homosexual was, and soon realized that, yes, I was gay."

Brian



Coming out to yourself

Coming out is a process, and coming out to yourself is the first step. Coming out to yourself is about acknowledging same-gender attractions; putting a name to the feelings or thoughts you are experiencing. This may mean identifying as gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender or queer.

It is never too late to come out to yourself. Some know they are different from a very young age, while others only realize it much later, as adults. We do not need a sexual experience to know that we are gay. However, our emotional, romantic and physical attractions are helpful markers of who we are attracted to. Coming out to the self often involves the process of “questioning”.



Questioning

Someone who is unsure of her or his sexuality is said to be “questioning” or “curious”. Questioning is a normal phase in understanding your sexual orientation or identity. Be patient and do not be in a hurry to label yourself as straight or gay. Take your time to discover and to recognize your feelings. Reading or hearing others’ coming out stories and getting to know gay persons who are comfortable with their identity may help you understand yourself better.

You may start questioning your previous self-identity, such as whether you are heterosexual, and old assumptions become new and uncertain, e.g., expectations of getting married to the opposite sex.

The way you present yourself may change. It is okay to experiment with different ways of self-representation. There is no one right way.

It is now possible to connect with other queer people, the queer community, and find a same-sex partner. You may consider how to come out to others and how they might respond to you.

When you come to fully accept your identity, things become simpler as you will acquire better self-awareness. Sometimes it may seem like you are getting to know yourself all over again! You will be able to move towards a positive self-image, with the potential to live life to the fullest.

Coming out to others

After you have acknowledged that you are queer, you may consider whether to come out to the people around you. Here are steps that might help you in this process.

1. Sound the person out by:

- Finding out what they think “being gay” means

- Finding out whether they have met or known any gay people

Even if they think gay people are ‘alright’ in general, they may not be happy about having a friend, colleague, relative, or family member who is gay. Keep in mind that some people may overestimate or underestimate their sentiments towards gay people. In other words, someone who thinks they are okay with gay people may nevertheless be shocked or upset when you come out.

- Asking their opinion of LGBTQ people

You can do this through indirect means: when watching a TV show, ask what they think of a character who appears to be queer or queer-acting; talk about a friend who is gay or indicate that you are supportive of gay people, and watch their reactions.

2. Be as confident and self-aware as possible before coming out to other people, and be prepared to answer any questions they might have.





How to come out

1. Come out for the right reasons

Be clear about your motivations for coming out. Do not come out in anger or hatred. That would only hurt, not heal, existing relationships.

2. Consider the risks versus the rewards

Coming out is a highly personal choice and a risk that can be worthwhile. Weigh the consequences against what would happen if they accept you for who you are. It is up to you to judge when you want to come out, to whom you would like to come out, and when to do so.

3. Come out to one person at a time

You may find it easier to come out to people one at a time. There may be exceptions to the rule, e.g., when the person might be violent. Coming out in a group may be more complicated because of group dynamics. People may behave differently in a group than when they are alone.

4. Select a good time in a suitable place

Based on your understanding of the person you are coming out to, select a place to come out. This can be over the internet/phone, face-to-face or even through letter-writing. As you may need to talk for an extended period of time, you may wish to choose a safe and quiet place where you will not be interrupted.

5. Be calm, confident, strong and patient

Speak calmly and confidently. Know that there may be negative reactions, but that may not be the end. People often say things they do not mean in moments of confusion. Be patient with them and with yourself.

6. Give them time

They may need some time to think through it. Be prepared for further questions on other occasions. Coming out can be a long process.



Coming out to friends

Friends are very often the first people to whom we come out. Coming out to friends may affect your social life and sources of emotional support. It may also result in closer and more authentic relationships. Let us look at some of the potential effects of coming out to friends.



"When I first started telling my friends, all was well, but then I began to cry. It was not because I was scared. I was overwhelmed with the feeling of letting all of it go."

Courtney

1. Awkwardness

Coming out may cause some awkwardness in your friendship. Your straight, same-sex friends may be worried that you are attracted to them. Reassure them that being gay does not mean you are automatically attracted to everyone of the same sex, just like straight people are not romantically attracted to everyone who is of the opposite sex.

Note: When coming out to a friend to whom you are attracted, it may help to find out whether they can accept your sexual identity first. You could then decide whether or not to reveal your feelings for them. Telling your friend may endanger the friendship, but it could also result in a more authentic relationship or even a romantic relationship if there is mutual interest.

2. Rejection and loss of friendship

Friendships may be tested and even lost. Therefore we need to judge how important it is to us to keep these people as friends, even if they turn out to be homophobic. Your friend may not accept you for who you are and thereafter, avoid you. Alternatively, they may try to pressure you to change or threaten to withdraw their friendship if you do not “change”.

3. Genuine, closer friendships

Your friend will now know another side of you. Genuine friendships are honest and involve mutual trust, understanding and respect. Coming out is an expression of trust and may deepen the relationship further. Hiding important parts of your life and identity from friends can take a lot of effort and gets in the way of true friendship.

4. Support for relationship issues

You may now be able to share your relationship woes with friends who truly accept you for who you are. Also, when your friends can see you and your partner together and accept the two of you, they affirm and support your relationship with your partner.

5. Educating others

By coming out, you are helping others to realize that it is normal to be gay and that gay people are part of and play many different roles in society.

Coming out at the workplace



*"When I started coming
out at work, I had great
fear that I'd lose my job."*

Dennis

The average Singaporean spends more than half our lives at work. Let us look at some of the possible effects of coming out at work:

1. Honest relationships

Coming out allows you to have honest relationships with co-workers where you do not have to lie about going on dates or be ambiguous about the gender of your partner. You may become closer to them.

2. Being yourself at work

It is stressful to have to hide your personal life. Being yourself allows you to concentrate better at work.

3. Discrimination

Coming out at work may affect your employment or career. A prejudiced supervisor may discriminate against you in direct or subtle ways; co-workers may distance themselves from you. Most organizations in Singapore do not have policies and clauses in their employment contracts that prohibit discrimination against LGBTQ employees. This means that you may not be able to protect yourself against acts of discrimination if they occur.

4. Support from other queer co-workers

If there are other queer people in the workplace, you could support one another. You could form an informal support group or, in gay-affirmative organizations, you may be able to join the company LGBT network. It helps to know that you are not alone.

5. Educating others

Some of your co-workers may not personally know any queer people. Coming out may break some of their stereotypes about what queer people are like.

Only come out to those who you can be sure will be able to continue a professional relationship with you even if they cannot accept you personally. Come out to trustworthy people who will keep it secret. You may need to explicitly request confidentiality, as they may not understand the risks of coming out. Do not tell the office tattletale – unless you intend to let everyone know, that is!

If you are “outed” by someone else (someone else tells a person about your sexual orientation without your consent), stay calm and find out how far the knowledge has spread. You can then choose to deal with it one person at a time or talk it out with a group of people. Consider being honest about your sexuality and who you are. Reassure them that your being gay does not mean you have become a different person and that it should have no bearing on your working relationship.

Coming out at school

"I was in denial almost the entire time I was in high school. I would find myself checking out girls, but I wouldn't admit to myself that I was doing that because I was attracted to them."

Makale

Have you thought about coming out to your peers, teachers or school counselors?

Coming out at school can be a good thing, as it enables you to be yourself in front of your peers. However, some students, teachers and school counselors simply do not know much about what it is to be gay and may react negatively to gay people. If they are gay-intolerant, they may use name-calling and other bullying tactics. There have been cases of verbal and physical violence in Singapore schools. Gossip may also be spread about you.

As a matter of school policy, homosexuality is generally not accepted. Teachers and school counselors may alert other teachers or the school principal about your sexuality. They may also contact your parents and take disciplinary action against you. You may be "outed". This is when someone else reveals your sexual orientation without your consent. You may not be prepared to deal with the consequences.

However, there are supportive teachers, school counselors and peers.

Tertiary institutions may be more accepting environments for gay students, though schools also vary greatly in this area. In general, it is a good idea to observe the environment closely for some time before deciding whether to come out.



Coming out to parents

Family is an important part of life. To many gay people, keeping their sexual orientation under wraps sabotages honest parent-child connection. Hence, many gay people choose to come out to their parents.

"I felt that I had to move away from home because I was so afraid that my mum would disown me because I am gay."

Veronica

"I tried writing letters to my mum. But I couldn't bring myself to tell her that her son is gay."

John



Before Coming Out

Before coming out:
understand your parents

1. Your parents may only understand heterosexuality

Chances are your parents are heterosexual. Not being familiar with same-sex attraction and relationships, your parents may find them difficult to understand.

2. Parents' role to teach and guide and their loss of "face"

Our society assumes that parents have a major role in teaching and guiding. Since homosexuality is often mistaken for poor behavior, your parents feel the burden to "correct your gay behavior". Some parents take their gay children to exorcisms, prayer sessions or reparative therapy, in desperate attempts to change their sexual orientation. Sometimes religious leaders may tell you that it is better to be celibate or that you can choose to be with a person of the opposite sex in spite of your inclinations. Others try to exert verbal or physical discipline. Until these attempts prove futile, parents may not give up.

It may also be a matter of "face". Parents may feel ashamed of themselves, their gay children or feel inadequate at parenting.

3. Your parents' fears

Reassuring your parents can be an important part of your coming out process. These fears involve various aspects of your life.

Health:

Since homosexuality is frequently associated with AIDS, parents are fearful that their gay children will acquire sexually transmitted infections (STIs).

Career:

Parents are concerned about discrimination at work resulting in loss of employment, income and career prospects.

Personal safety:

They may be concerned about your being at increased risk of violence from others.

Relationships:

Parents may worry about your happiness, such as whether you will find a partner who can take care of you. As a result of their unfamiliarity with homosexuality, parents may not know how to support their gay children, e.g., helping children cope with relationship issues. This contributes towards their feelings of helplessness.

4. Your parents thought you were straight

Most parents expect that their child is straight. Coming out to your parents may challenge their previous understanding of you. The child they thought they always knew may suddenly seem alien.

It is important to show your parents that you are still the same person as before, with the same values, ambitions, hobbies, friends, etc.

5. If your parents' religious values say homosexuality is wrong

Your parents may have religion-based objections to your sexual orientation. It may help to expose them to alternative interpretations and supportive religious leaders or institutions.

Before Coming Out

Know your stuff

With little information on sexual orientation, parental understanding of homosexuality may come from negative stereotypes and myths. Therefore, when you come out, it is best to have accurate information at your fingertips.

You will also need to equip your parents with knowledge, so prepare resources such as educational gay-affirming websites, books and contacts for counselors who can provide a listening ear. It is also helpful to provide multiple credible sources, such as statements from major institutions like the American Psychiatric Association (APA). You can refer to the resources, references and links in this guide as a starting point.

Your parents may ask, "How do you know you are gay?" or say, "It is just a passing phase." "You can stop being gay, can't you?" Answer their questions confidently.

Before Coming Out

Consider available support

If you are still living with your parents or are financially dependent on them, be prepared that they may withdraw or reduce their financial support. Should they throw you out, you will need to find another place to live in. These are important practical concerns. Considering these potential adverse reactions, it is advisable to be financially independent before coming out.

The coming out process may take an emotional toll on you. The most common negative impact is psychological. Parents may use harsh and hurtful words (e.g., calling you "perverted", "abnormal" or "disgusting") and actions (e.g., the silent treatment). Surround yourself with supportive friends, join a support group for queer folk and/or see a gay-affirmative counselor to help you through difficult times. Supportive aunts, uncles, cousins or siblings could help in your coming out process. They can play the mediator between you and your parents.

When looking for sources of support, you may find it difficult to differentiate between gay-tolerant and gay-accepting people. Tolerant people may not think your sexuality is right, but they do not see it as a hindrance in their interactions with you. Tolerant people may be friends, but are unlikely to be reliable confidantes for sexuality issues. Tolerant friends may be less empathetic as they may

think that the stress you undergo is the result of your “gay lifestyle choice”. People who accept your sexuality (gay-affirmative) are those who accord the same level of respect for your relationship as they would a heterosexual one.

In more extreme cases, family members may react with violence. If you think your parents, siblings or relatives may harm you physically, do not come out. In such circumstances, it may be advisable to first move out. Prioritize your safety.

Before Coming Out

Be prepared for fluctuations and outbursts

Your parents may be responding to a drastic change in what they thought they knew. They may wonder how to respond to relatives, friends, or colleagues and feel uncertain. They may swing between denial, acceptance and rejection. You may also experience unpredictable, emotional outbursts from them, resulting from anger, worry, anxiety or guilt. Their words and actions may be very hurtful. Some parents try to make their children feel guilty through statements like, “Where’s your sense of filial piety?” or “Your life is not just yours alone.”

Coming out may be a lifelong process. Parents may continue to hope that their children will “turn straight” for a very long time. Many gay people come out several times to their parents before their parents finally accept it. You may need perseverance, extraordinary patience and good social support to cope.

Coming Out

Coming out for the first time

1. Consider coming out to one parent at a time

It is advisable to test the waters with them separately and then come out to the parent who you think is more receptive to your sexual orientation.

2. Set aside sufficient time, and look for a quiet and private place

This gives all concerned a safe place to express their emotions.

3. Reassure your parents

a. Alleviate guilt

Parental roles involve teaching. It is a societal myth that youths can be led astray "into homosexuality". Therefore, your parents may feel that they did a bad job at parenting and at protecting you from bad influences. They may feel responsible and say things like, "Is it something I did that caused you to be gay?" or "I am sorry I neglected you in your childhood."

Let your parents know that there is little evidence to suggest that sexual orientation is a product of one's upbringing. On the other hand, there is increasing scientific evidence indicating biological determinants of sexual orientation. Remind them that there are other signs of a good upbringing, virtues such as being hardworking, kind, courteous and responsible.

b. Express your care and concern for them

Gestures such as enquiring after their health, reminders about dietary restrictions or even little things like offering a coat can be helpful. Showing your parents care and concern demonstrates that you are still the same loving person they knew you to be.

c. Let them know that you can take care of yourself

Displaying independence and responsibility, such as having a stable career, may help convince them of your maturity. When your parents see that you make wise choices, they will feel more assured about your future and less worried about you.

*What if you are
“outed” against
your will?*



Perhaps you left your diary, gay magazines or DVDs lying around or your neighbor/relative/parents' colleague saw you walking closely and linking arms with so-and-so. Such incidents may force you to deal with questions from frantic parents, ruin plans to come out at a later date or intentions to stay in the closet.

We may respond in a number of ways:

1. **Denial** "Nothing happened."
2. **Changing focus** "You are thinking too much, how can I be gay?"
3. **Partial admission** "I do feel some attraction, but I am still exploring."
4. **Admit "mistake"** "I am sorry, I won't do it again."
5. **Coming out** "Yes, I am gay."

Consider the following factors when confronted:

1. Strength of the "evidence"

If the evidence is strong (e.g., you were caught in the act by your parents), then denial may not be possible and may only affect their trust in you.

2. Concerned vs. Angry parents

You should also consider whether your parents are more concerned than angry or vice versa. If your parents are concerned rather than angry, it is safer to talk to your parents. Remember, your safety is the top priority.

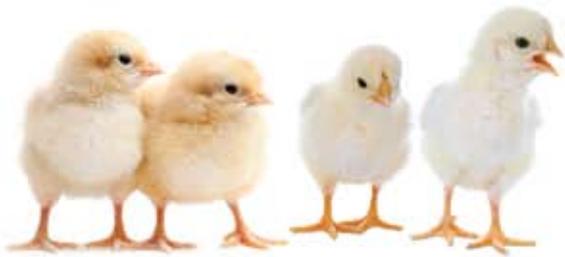
3. Recent events and status of relationship

If things between your parents and you have not been going well or if there were recent unfortunate events, coming out at this time is likely to aggravate their distress. It might be better to postpone coming out to them. We choose to come out to others in many ways and at different paces. There are people with whom you can share your coming out experiences or from whom you could ask for help. Some local groups and resources are listed in the Resources section of this booklet.

We hope our coming out guide has been useful for you. Take heart that gay people around the world are forging the way forward.

You are not alone.





"I have always felt different.
And I always wonder, why
something so natural, can
make me feel so estranged
from the rest of the world."



Coming Out Stories



"Coming out means so much more than telling someone you are gay; it means freeing yourself from the bondage of self-hatred and fear. It means empowering yourself, allowing yourself the opportunity to love and be loved. Today, I can honestly say that I love and I am loved."

Karl



“And as I looked back, I realized that I had turned into a beautiful swan, something I have never expected in my journey.”

Coming out to yourself:

An ugly duckling

I have always felt different.

And I always wondered, why something so natural, can make me feel so estranged from the rest of the world.

When I was 5 years old, I developed a crush on my kindergarten teacher. I remembered the crush, not because the crush was someone much older, but because even at the tender age of 5, I knew I was not supposed to have a crush on another woman. I would have gladly dismissed the incident, if it weren't to be followed by yet another crush on my piano teacher when I was 10. I was so scared of my feelings that I made excuses to my parents and ended my piano lessons with her. I thought my feelings would fade with time. I was right. But it didn't end my attraction to women. Many more followed.

I am turning 28 this year. I believe that I will spend my life with someone, but it will have to be with a woman, because I have been attracted to and loved women from as young as I can remember. It's not something I dictate, or want, it is just the way I am.

I had gone through numerous battles with myself. Guys tried to befriend me and I enjoyed spending time with them, until the scale tipped and I found myself suddenly in the middle of a dating game that I was not interested in. It always ended with them asking similar questions, "How is it possible that you enjoy my company and like me and yet we cannot even try out for a relationship!" I asked myself the same question from time to time. The answer was simple, but I refused to let it surface. Because the consequences of admitting to the truth were too frightful to even consider the possibility.

I could never be a lesbian.

How could I be? For one, I am normal. I have a loving family, a strong social network of friends (consisting of both genders), good grades and a healthy body. Lesbians, as far as I knew, were deviant, mentally disturbed, unattractive, probably had bad experiences with boys and most of all, they were everything I am not. And I didn't want to be one.

And so, through the years of growing up, I listened to my friends gush about their crushes, regale each other with stories of how they met their bfs/gfs, their agonies of breaking up and the ditzzy experiences of falling in love again. To all these, I remained a bystander, listening, consoling and rejoicing. Deep down, I could identify with those feelings, because these were what I felt towards girls my whole life. But of course, fear

kept my mouth shut, and fear kept me in denial. Over the years, I waited expectantly, for those heart-fluttering butterflies in the stomach feelings to take over me and sweep me away, for "nature" to take over and make me fall for a guy. However, as I grew older, my hope grew dimmer, because I was increasingly aware of my attraction to women. Of course, I guarded my secret conscientiously. I didn't give myself time to evaluate why I was feeling this way towards the same sex. Maybe deep down, I was willing it to go away. But I always brushed it aside and covered my tracks well by joining in comments about boys. Over time, this growing restlessness and budding dissatisfaction grew. I wondered to myself over and over again why I couldn't just join my friends, and live life.

Then I fell in love when I was in University. We were both dating guys (I tried my hardest to date guys) at the time but our chemistry when we were hanging out together was undeniably strong. For the first time in my life, I couldn't hide behind my well-worn mask of indifference that I had carefully constructed over the years to cover my real feelings. We were both very scared of our strong romantic attraction towards each other. However we decided to give it a try. It was the first time that I felt I was doing something natural – dating and being with a woman. Few of my friends knew of this relationship. How could I have admitted to them, when I had trouble acknowledging it myself? The lack of social support, positive feedback and

secretive "underground" situation were detrimental to our relationship. This internal struggle to do what was deemed normal by society while repressing how I really felt had a slow but poisonous effect on me. I gradually went into depression.

Then came the self-recriminations.

Why me? Why am I born gay when so many people are straight? Why am I deprived of my rights to love, to marry and have a family? If I have the slightest inclination or attraction towards guys, I would be straight. As an only child, I dreaded to disappoint my parents. Many nights, I cried for not being able to be myself, for having to force myself to be with men, and for succumbing to social expectations that men are the people I should be romantically involved with.

Then came the final straw. Three things happened concurrently; my grandma, whom I was close to, passed away; my then girlfriend broke up with me; and my final year exhibition graduation show was in a month's time. During this period, I was a mess, trudging on daily in a state of mindless pain, hoping for release yet finding none. No one knew the extent of my grief. I couldn't express them and I didn't know how to without betraying my innermost fear. There were too many conflicting emotions raging inside me, yet I had so little time to think.

It was through this period that I finally decided that I needed to do something. For the first time, I searched for "Lesbian and gay coming out resources" online. Yes, it was painful and took a lot of courage just to type those words, because they represented my first conscious step in self-acknowledgment. I went to Youtube and 'googled' for gay-friendly movies. My initial euphoria at discovering gay-friendly channels gave way to despair again when I realized that all these online portals were locked in a computer and the characters would never jump out and interact with me. The loneliness I felt was all-consuming, and the fear was gradually eating me up. I needed to talk to a professional. But I was so scared, because in my mind, talking to someone about my sexuality is confirmation that there is indeed something wrong with me. But I knew I couldn't keep this to myself any longer. I finally found a gay-friendly counseling center and after much deliberation, went for my first session. It was much later that I gradually found the courage to deal with my sexuality and come out to my family and friends. If it weren't for the courageous women who have helped me, the closet will still be my only playroom and the mothballs my toys. I thank all of you from the bottom of my heart.

Heartfelt gratitude.

P/S: Through the past 3 years, I stepped out and met other lesbians. I was worried that I couldn't fit in, knowing how normal I am. But it turned out that lesbians are your everyday people out there, who have their own careers, their own lives and their own idiosyncrasies, much like anyone I had met in my life. And this realization empowered me, and removed my internal homophobia of gay people.

And as I looked back, I realized that I had turned into a beautiful swan, something I have never expected in my journey.

Age 28, Art Director



"I believe, that
the love of those
who truly love us
will prevail."

Coming out to a friend:

Love surpasses all

I knew EI, my girlfriend, at a place where I worked and studied. I was a trainee Chinese teacher.

Let's start from the discussions my good friend and I had about EI. My good friend is a fellow student and also my neighbor. Besides my relationship with EI, we chat openly about anything under the sun. My friend believes that love surpasses all else. Previously, she underwent an explosive relationship and was terribly hurt. Nonetheless, she retained her belief that love surpasses all else. She respects love. Hence, love was a frequent topic between us.

In one of our conversations, she told me this: there are two things in this world that she cannot fathom. The first is sadism and masochism; the second is homosexuality.

I was not out to her at that time. Nevertheless, I pointed out that everything and everyone in this world are worth our understanding as long as no one is hurt in the process. The happiness is theirs; outsiders will never be in their shoes to experience the same. At the same time, I shared that I am least able to understand those who lived life without love. My friend was moved by my words and mildly concurred.

Some time later, El and I began to date. After each date, I would be filled with excitement. Unable to contain myself, I would run next door and babble away about how wonderful El is and how happy I am. I told her repeatedly, "If El is a man, I would have pursued her long ago and I believe I will get him." Sentences like these were shared between excited descriptions and happy jokes.

Much later, El and I began to date seriously. On an extraordinary and yet ordinary day, she confessed her love. We began to meet after classes. Gradually, I introduced her to a couple of good friends of mine, one of whom is my neighbor. We would dine together, four of us, and they warmed up to El. El draws pretty well, and she loves to dedicate songs she plays at music stores. I shared with my neighbor all these beautiful moments and details. These gave me a foundation for coming out.

I came out one afternoon. At that time, El had returned to her country of origin (we are of different nationalities). After lunch with my good friend, we began to chat in my room. It was a usual afternoon and we embarked on the inexhaustible topic of love. At this point, I missed El terribly and was completing paperwork to see her. My good friend had difficulty locating me and asked me what I had been occupied with. Taking the opportunity, we began to talk about my girlfriend.

By this time, I had about half a year's time of preparation. I tested her many times in this period. Coupled with my understanding of her, I knew it was time to disclose my sexuality. Hence I began, "Actually..." I spoke many words through copious tears. Though I knew I was not at fault, one's sexuality is nothing to be proud of. Hence, in spite of the close friendship we had, I was struggling with what to say and the limits to disclosure. My feelings were complex.

I was not sure of her reaction, but I knew she would not be hysterical nor would she use my sexuality to hurt me. I strongly believed that her maturity would strengthen me. I was right. Instead of harping on "face", she encouraged me to cherish everything and to protect myself as the relationship is still budding. To receive affirmation from a friend for love that is not easy to come by...my coming out was a happy one.

It has been 6 months since I came out. My friend remains a source of comfort and care in my girlfriend's absence. I cherish the openness that I now have with her.

The coming out road is not smooth-sailing. We need time to face ourselves; our families and friends need even more time to accept us. However, I believe, that the love of those who truly love us will prevail.

Best wishes!

Age 25, Educator



“Coming out to my family has been a long process. In fact it is still ongoing. Although it has been tedious in some ways, coming out so that they know the real me is worth every effort.”

Coming out to family:

A meandering journey

I was attracted to men since I was a child. It felt natural to me. But I did not know the term "gay" until I graduated from university.

Growing up, I remember ours was not a touchy-feely, heart-to-heart-talk kind of family. My siblings and I knew that our parents loved us, but in a dutiful kind of way. My father and mother were busy running a sun-dry shop. My elder sister and older brother were in boarding schools. Only my second brother and I stayed at home, growing up together. He went on to work as a consultant in a government-linked firm, writing award-winning poetry in his spare time, traveling for work and making friends from diverse backgrounds. We were close. He provided financial support for my tertiary education.

Initially, I received all my information about being gay from books and the internet. At that point in my life, I thought I was the only gay in Singapore and would have to migrate to San Francisco, or any one of the major cities with a sizable gay population to live a full life.

Gradually, I discovered an active local online community as well as actual GLBT groups. I decided to volunteer actively as a way to contribute and to meet other gay people.

I also planned to come out to my family as I wanted them to know the real me. My second brother was the first person I approached. He was well traveled, and has many gay friends. I thought he might be more understanding. But I did not really know what to expect although we were close growing up. I took the risk and emailed him, saying I think I might be gay. He replied that it doesn't matter whether I am gay or straight, the family would still love me. I was moved and encouraged.

After that, I decided to approach other members of my family. My mother is a housewife, without education but has friends from diverse backgrounds. My father used to manage rubber plantations and factories, and during the time I knew him, ran a sundry shop. My elder sister and older brother were civil servants.

I thought I had all the time in the world to decide whom to approach next, sort out what I had to say, how to say it, when and where to say it.

On April 10, 2004, my father died in a traffic accident. To say I was devastated would be an understatement. I was his favorite child. It is my eternal regret that I did not manage to tell him about myself.

The regret was partly due to the fact that I only returned home once a year during Chinese New Year. Looking back now, I could see that a part of me resisted going home because I felt I did not fit in as a gay child. I realized now I had wasted a lot of time keeping myself separated.

In those dark periods following his death, my mother and I talked a lot in person and subsequently over the phone. I heard many anecdotes that helped me understand where he and she – and thus me – came from. They were match-made and my maternal uncles and aunties owed their affluent lives to the start my father gave them. Despite it not being a love match, there was tender regard between them.

After my father's death, I knew time waits for no one. I had to accelerate the pace of my coming out. I discussed this with my second brother, who advised caution as he was afraid our mother and other siblings might not be ready, and the extended family might never understand.

Since then, I have kept my family updated with respect to my voluntary activities, especially GLBT-related ones. I

kept dropping the word "gay" in my emails and phone calls home. I forwarded gay-related news stories to my siblings. I told my mother I would never marry. In the dialect we speak, marriage is gendered. So that means declaring I would never marry a woman. I talked about the gay wedding I attended. I mentioned friends who have been with their same sex partners for 18, 20 years, which is longer than a lot of straight married couples we know.

Initially my mother would sometimes use words like "pondan", "half man half woman" to describe gay persons. After being inundated with such information for a while, one day she blurted out, "Why are you talking about gays, are you gay?" so I seized the opportunity to say, "Yes!"

She started to ask questions and I discovered that she could not comprehend how two men or two women could love each other to the point of desiring marriage to each other and raising children together. While trying to bring across to her what it meant for a man to love another man, or a woman to love another woman, I had to examine my own ideas and concepts of relationship. Her "aha moment" when she exclaimed "Oh, no different from a man and a woman who get married and have children" was likewise a moment of clarity for me.

Last July, at the end of my stay with her in Beijing, my mother asked whether I have a boyfriend. I teared. We had both come a long way.

My elder sister, older brother and grown nephews and nieces are on Facebook. We are in each other's friends list. This is currently my favourite way of keeping them updated about my activities, GLBT-related or otherwise.

Coming out to my family has been a long process. In fact it is still ongoing. Although it has been tedious in some ways, coming out so that they know the real me is worth every effort.



Re sources

Resources in Singapore

Groups

Sayoni www.sayoni.com

Community and advocacy group for queer women

AFA www.afa.org.sg

A voluntary, community-based organization committed to AIDS prevention, advocacy and support

Free Community Church www.freecomchurch.org

A non-denominational Christian church in Singapore that affirms the diversity and sacred worth of all individuals

Fridae www.fridae.com

Asian LGBT portal and online community

Heartland www.heartlandsg.org

Buddhist fellowship built around the philosophy of the Kalama Sutta

Indignation www.plu.sg/indignation

Singapore's annual LGBT pride season

Pelanggi Pride Centre www.pelangipridecentre.org

LGBT not-for-profit community space and resource centre

People Like Us plu.sg

Gay and lesbian group focused on advocacy and public education

Redqueen redqueensg.blogspot.com

Mailing list and discussion group for queer women

Safe Singapore safesingapore.blogspot.com

A Singapore-based online resource centre and communications channel for LGBT persons and their loved ones

Safehaven www.oursafehaven.com

A Free Community Church ministry that conducts regular Christ-centered gatherings

SGButterfly www.sgbutterfly.org

Portal and forum for transgendered men and women in Singapore

Signal www.plu.sg/main/signal_00.htm

Mailing list and discussion group for gay, political and social issues run by People Like Us

Singapore Queer Straight Alliance (SinQSA) www.sinqsa.org

Group dedicated to reconciling queer and straight people through providing a communications platform and raising awareness

The Bear Project thebearproject.blogspot.com

Gay community group catered to big-sized men and those who love them

Trevvy www.trevvy.com

Gay community portal

Women's Nite women_snite.livejournal.com

A monthly gathering of lesbian and bisexual women to discuss pertinent issues

Young OUT Here young-out-here.blogspot.com

A group of LGBT youths coming together to build social and support networks in a safe and inclusive environment

Counseling

Counseling and Care Centre www.counsel.org.sg

A non-governmental, non-profit agency offering psychological counseling services and training for professionals in the mental health and social services

Oogachaga www.oogachaga.com

Volunteer-run counseling and personal development organization for LGBTQ individuals

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*"I look forward, to the day
when I can fill in a form with
her name under 'spouse';
that if our children fall sick,
either one of us can take
childcare leave; that we can
co-own a HDB flat; and for
the day when our neighbours
know us as 'the lovely family
in unit 8A'."*

Huimin



Produced by **Sayoni** 

