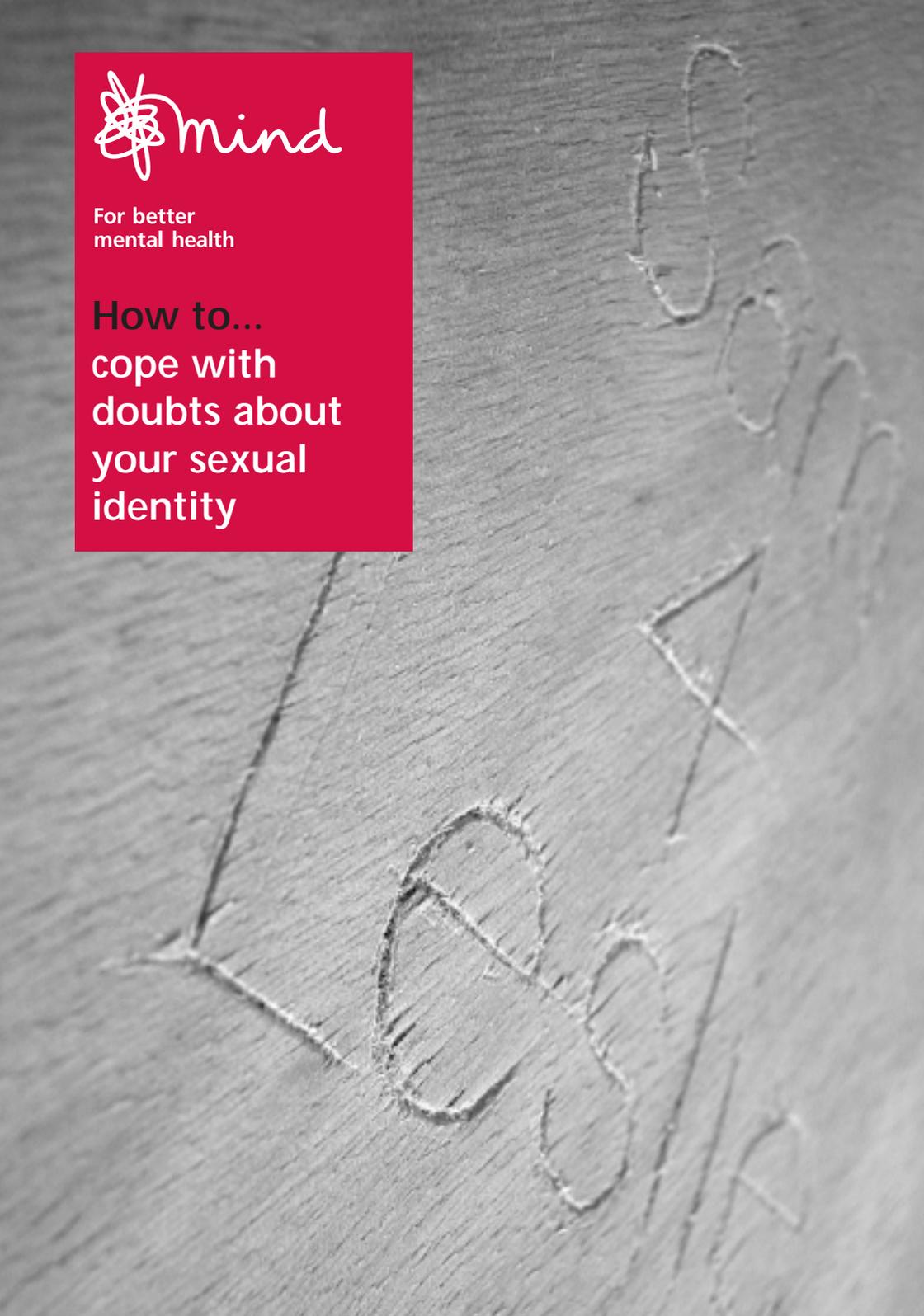




For better
mental health

**How to...
cope with
doubts about
your sexual
identity**



How to... cope with doubts about your sexual identity

“I’ve just fallen desperately in love with a girl at school, and I don’t know who I am anymore. I think she’s so beautiful. Sometimes we go back to her house, when everyone’s out, and we lie in bed together. It’s just the most wonderful thing in the world. Then my mum found out. She read some letters from her to me and she was really upset. She said I wasn’t to let my dad know; he would kill me. She said it was just a silly phase, and I would grow out of it and find a nice boy to marry. I do want to get married and have children, but I just love my girlfriend so much.”

“I’ve always known I was gay, ever since I can remember. I like girls as friends, but it’s boys that really turn me on. My parents aren’t too bad about it. They like my current boyfriend a lot. I have been teased a bit at school, but most people accept us. I don’t really care what anyone else thinks – this is just me.”

“I had children when I was young – they’re now 16 and 17. I’ve always done what was expected of me – got married, had children. Now they’re older, I’m feeling more and more unsatisfied. I’m close to my husband but I feel much closer to my friends who are women – and want to spend my time with them. I’ve been doing some reading and I’m wondering whether I might be a lesbian, but that feels pretty scary. It feels like, at my age, it would turn my life upside down. What would my son and daughter think? And what if I’m wrong?”

This booklet suggests ways of exploring your sexuality and the feelings this entails. It also provides further sources of information and of organisations, which can support you and help you work out what is right for you.



Am I gay or straight?

There is no single or simple answer to this question. We find out about our sexuality in different ways and at different times in our lives. Some people have their first gay experience or relationship when they are young, and others when they are older. They may well have assumed, until then, that they were heterosexual.

The only person who can say whether you are lesbian, gay or bisexual is you. It may be that the most important question to ask yourself is: who do I feel sexually attracted to, men or women or both? You don't necessarily have to have had sex with someone of the same sex to identify yourself as lesbian, gay or bisexual. It may also be about who you feel closest to and connect with emotionally.

It may be very clear to you that you only feel attracted to people of the same sex, and not to those of the opposite sex. You may have felt this all your life, or have just started to feel this way. You may have had gay relationships as a teenager, but assumed this was a passing 'phase'. Whatever the case, you might not want to admit your feelings to yourself, or to others, and it can feel very uncomfortable.

However, your position may be more complex. Often, people have had heterosexual experiences or relationships first. You may have been involved in a long-term heterosexual relationship, perhaps got married and had children, and then fallen passionately in love with someone of the same sex. Or you might be having lesbian or gay relationships in secret. This can make you feel very guilty or torn. This experience is very common, given the pressure in our society to be heterosexual (known as heterosexism).

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Being heterosexual is so much taken for granted in our society, even now, that most people just assume they are going to grow up heterosexual and stay that way. Falling in love with someone of the same sex, or being turned on by them, can be really exciting and inspiring. But it can also feel very scary and overwhelming, because being lesbian, gay or bisexual is still not generally acceptable. Society surrounds us with messages that tell us it's wrong – and this can make it even more difficult for individuals who want to talk things over with someone.



What should I do if I'm not sure?

An important first step is to be able to be honest with yourself about your feelings. You might need time and help to know whether what you are feeling is an effect of difficulties in your heterosexual relationships, or whether having lesbian or gay, or bisexual, relationships is what will suit you best. Though it's a difficult step to take, it might be a huge relief to admit your feelings and pursue relationships that feel more satisfying and honest to you.

Sometimes, such conflicts of feelings make it hard to work out that you are attracted to someone of the same sex. You might feel nothing at all, or you could feel revulsion and dislike. If you do feel able to admit an attraction, it can bring on feelings of self-hatred, as a result of society's rejection of homosexuality. Many people find counselling or therapy very helpful. (See *Useful organisations*, on p. 12, and *Further reading*, on p. 14.)

Who can I tell?



Perhaps the most common fear is that you will be rejected by people you love, or who you depend on. Many people feel unable to tell their parents, because they expect a horrified and hurtful reaction, and this does sometimes happen. But others find that it's not as bad as they had feared. Parents often have an inkling already. They may have been waiting to be told, or been trying to deny it. It may take them time to adjust, and some will undoubtedly be unable to accept their children's sexuality.

Reactions will vary, depending on your background or your circumstances. For example, there are particular prejudices facing disabled people, who are not supposed to have any kind of sexuality. Black and minority ethnic communities may also take a different view of what is, and isn't, acceptable.

Many people argue that it's better to be as out in the open as possible, rather than living a life of secrecy and evasion. It can be a great strain, and very undermining, not to be able to be open about yourself and honest about your feelings and your life. But it's important that you talk to people you trust. There are still jobs and situations where it's not safe to come out. Some people experience bullying or harassment, for instance, and lesbians, gay men and bisexuals are still not protected by law, in this country.

Often, people's reactions turn out to be worse in anticipation than they are in reality, even if the response, when it comes, is not as positive as you might have liked.

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What support can I get?

This might be the time to find some support for yourself, from lesbian, gay or bisexual groups, especially if you expect or are worried about a hostile reaction. You'll find a number of lesbian, gay and bisexual groups and events advertised in different publications or through various organisations. (See *Useful organisations*, on p. 12.)

Getting involved in a group, going to a social, or ringing one of the telephone advice lines, can help you feel less isolated. They provide an opportunity to meet people you can be out with, feel accepted by and who have had similar experiences, in a place where you feel safe enough to talk about yourself. There are also organisations that support the families of lesbians and gay men, as well as supporting their sons and daughters.



Why do I feel there's something wrong?

The prejudice against lesbians or gays can make people worried and anxious about themselves. You may feel you are abnormal in some way, or can't possibly be a proper man or woman. Society often depicts lesbians as unfeminine and gay men as too feminine or 'effeminate'. These negative stereotypes can result in fears that your sexuality is unacceptable. It isn't, and there is nothing wrong with you.

People who are lesbian, gay or bisexual have as many similarities and differences as those who are heterosexual. There is no reliable evidence to suggest that homosexuality is associated with any kind of personality disorder or abnormality. Scientists and others who have devoted time and money to looking for such differences have come up with nothing at all!

If you have had a religious upbringing that regards being lesbian or gay as sinful, or if your beliefs condemn it as unnatural or inferior to heterosexuality, it may be hard not to feel bad.

We can all be undermined by negative attitudes we have absorbed. It's important to remember that their source lies in society's homophobia. It can have a powerful influence on us all, regardless of how liberal or liberated we may feel.

Fortunately, the legislation often known as Clause 28, against the 'promotion of homosexuality', has now been repealed. It led to much misunderstanding and has mistakenly deterred people from presenting lesbian or gay sexuality as a valid alternative to heterosexuality.

There are several pressure groups campaigning for, and on behalf of, gay men and lesbians. Knowing that these exist, or getting involved and joining one, can be very empowering. You will be among people who really are 'glad to be gay', and who are convinced of the rights of lesbians and gay men to equality in all areas of life.

The best sources of comprehensive information on a whole range of issues are often lesbian and gay switchboards, which operate in many cities. Lists are often available in publications such as the Pink Paper, Gay Times and Diva, all of which you can find in bookshops (particularly in lesbian and gay or alternative bookshops) or on the web. Or you should be able to get details by ringing one of the organisations listed under *Useful organisations*, on p. 12.

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Who or what defines whether I'm gay?

What is important is whether you want to define or identify yourself in this way. There is greater acknowledgement today of the diversity and fluidity of people's sexuality, so you may define yourself in different ways, at different times.

Some people's sexuality stays constant throughout their lives, while others' may change in all kinds of ways. During our teenage years it may be true that issues around sexuality are very pressing, and, particularly for lesbians and gay men, this can be a difficult or confusing time. But questions about sexual identity can arise at any time in our lives, after years of heterosexuality or marriage, and at any age. This is not necessarily easier or harder.

You might feel more confident and established, in many areas of your life, than when you were younger. But you may also have more commitments, such as a partner or children, which can make choosing a different sexuality feel like a big upheaval. Our sexuality is just as important at any age, but it might not seem so much to define who you are as a person, when you are older, as when you are younger. It may be more a question of not wanting to live with constant compromise and a wish to be more honest and open, with yourself and others.

Some people define themselves as lesbian or gay, without having had sexual relationships with someone of the same sex, because they know this is how they feel and they identify strongly with lesbian or gay lifestyles. Others feel it's important to make such a statement about themselves and their relationships, and not to be invisible or vague. Many people call themselves lesbian or gay, though they have had relationships with both sexes and don't completely rule this out for the future. Others choose to describe themselves as bisexual.

You may feel strongly that calling yourself lesbian or gay is a political issue, and that it's very important to be out. Or you may decide it's too defining or limiting, or making too much of a public statement about yourself; that it's nobody's business but your own.

Some people might not be sure what their sexuality would be if they were not with their particular boyfriend or girlfriend. It can be very frightening or difficult to use particular terms about yourself, some of which have been or are still being used in a derogatory way, and this may hold you back. It's likely that your feelings are negative because of society's attitudes, rather than because you are uncertain about your sexuality.

Are there particular problems with relationships if I'm gay?



Gay men and lesbians encounter just the same problems with relationships as heterosexuals. The same difficulties with finding partners, coping with dependency, intimacy or jealousy, and with sustaining a long-term relationship.

However, there are extra stresses that can have an effect on lesbian or gay relationships. These include:

- The impact of society's homophobia and heterosexism.
- Your own negative or unconfident feelings about your sexuality, which can contribute to undermining a relationship.
- A lack of family or other social support for the relationship, which may feel particularly acute depending on your culture. Finding friends or networks that support and value your relationship can be invaluable.

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You may feel unsure how to behave, or what is expected of you, in lesbian or gay relationships, because of a lack of positive role models. This may make you feel you're making it up as you go along. But it's up to you what you want from your relationship and how you get your needs met.

Having difficulties in relationships can make you question whether being lesbian or gay is for you. You may feel it would be easier if you were in a heterosexual relationship. But this could be a way of not confronting other difficulties in a relationship. Of course, some people do change their minds, and this may also be difficult to admit.

Celibacy

Celibacy is another option; not having sexual relationships with anyone. It can be a productive withdrawal from relationships, altogether, or a way of giving you time to think about what you want. But it can also express a deep fear of sex and sexual intimacy. This fear can be for any number of reasons: too many disappointments or rejections; a history of sexual abuse, or deep conflicts about sex. Counselling or psychotherapy can be particularly helpful. (See *Useful organisations*, on p. 12, and *Further reading*, on p. 14, for more information.)

Can mental health services help?

Lesbians, gay men and bisexuals don't experience mental distress or illness because of their sexuality. But the impact of heterosexism and homophobia can, of course, contribute to distress, as can racism and oppression on the grounds of disability. You may feel very apprehensive about approaching any kind of mental health service, for fear of not being understood or of your sexuality being seen as abnormal. These worries are not unfounded. Homosexuality was only removed as a psychiatric diagnosis in 1993, and lesbian or gay sexuality is sometimes still seen as mentally abnormal by some professionals in the field. But this is by no means true of all.



Nowadays, there is much more awareness in the mental health field, and help is available that is sensitive and accepting. There are also organisations specifically for lesbians, gay men and bisexuals, including counselling organisations. You can find help by word of mouth, or by going through one of the groups included over the page, under *Useful organisations*. Some of these are specifically for lesbians, gay men and bisexuals, some of them are committed to challenging homophobic treatment, and some run support groups or particular services.

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Useful organisations

Mind

Mind is the leading mental health organisation in England and Wales, providing a unique range of services through its local associations, to enable people with experience of mental distress to have a better quality of life. For more information about any mental health issues, including details of your nearest local Mind association, contact the Mind website: www.mind.org.uk or Mind *infoline* on 0845 766 0163.

Consortium

2 Plough Yard, Shoreditch High Street, London EC2A 3LP
tel. 020 7422 8611, email: admin@clgb.org.uk
web: www.lgbconsortium.org.uk
Membership network of over 350 groups working in lesbian, gay and bisexual (LGB) communities around the UK

Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (FFLAG)

PO Box 84, Exeter, Devon EX4 4AN
tel. 01454 852 418 or 01392 279 546
email: info@fflag.org.uk web: www.fflag.org.uk
Organisation of parents of lesbian daughter and gay sons

Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender Network

Amnesty International UK, 99–119 Rosebery Avenue
London EC1R 4RE
tel. 020 7417 6370, email: rainbow@amnesty.org.uk
web: www.amnesty.org
Campaigns against discriminatory legislation and/or human rights violations against individuals on the basis of their sexuality

Lesbian and Gay Christian Movement

Oxford House, Derbyshire Street, Bethnal Green, London E2 6HG

helpline: 020 7739 8134, email: lgcm@lgcm.org.uk

web: www.lgcm.org.uk

Offers a counselling helpline, run by volunteers

London Lesbian and Gay Switchboard

PO Box 7324, London N1 9QS

helpline: 020 7837 7324, web: www.lsg.org.uk or

www.queery.org.uk

Provides national support service for gay men and lesbians

Pink Therapy

Box BCM 5159, London WC1N 3XX

tel. 020 7739 5542, email: info@pinktherapy.com

web: www.pinktherapy.com

Private therapy for sexual minority clients. Nationwide directory

PACE (Project for Advice, Counselling and Education Ltd)

34 Hartham Road, London N7 9JL

tel. 020 7700 1323, email: ace@dircon.co.uk

web: www.pacehealth.org.uk

Services for people who identify as gay or lesbian

Stonewall

46 Grosvenor Gardens, London SW1W 0EB

tel. 020 7881 9440, minicom: 020 7881 9996

email: info@stonewall.org.uk web: www.stonewall.org.uk

Equality and social justice for lesbian, gay men and bisexuals

Terrence Higgins Trust

52–54 Grays Inn Road, London WC1X 8JU

helpline: 0845 1221 200, email: info@tht.org.uk

web: www.tht.org.uk

For services relating to HIV and AIDS with calls at local rate

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Further reading

- How to accept yourself* Dr W. Dryden (Sheldon Press 1999) £6.99
- How to assert yourself* (Mind 2003) £1
- How to cope with panic attacks* (Mind 2003) £1
- How to cope with relationship problems* (Mind 2003) £1
- How to cope with sleep problems* (Mind 2003) £1
- How to deal with bullying at work* (Mind 2001) £1
- How to improve your mental wellbeing* (Mind 2002) £1
- How to increase your self-esteem* (Mind 2003) £1
- How to look after yourself* (Mind 2002) £1
- How to stop worrying* (Mind 2003) £1
- Hurting and healing: how to overcome the trauma of sexual abuse and rape* G. Wade (Vega 2001) £7.99
- Making sense of herbal remedies* (Mind 2000) £3.50
- Making sense of homeopathy* (Mind 2001) £3.50
- Making sense of traditional Chinese medicine* (Mind 2001) £3.50
- The Mind guide to food and mood* (Mind 2000) £1
- The Mind guide to managing stress* (Mind 2003) £1
- The Mind guide to physical activity* (Mind 2001) £1
- The Mind guide to relaxation* (Mind 2001) £1
- The Mind guide to spiritual practices* (Mind 2003) £1
- The Mind guide to yoga* (Mind 2001) £1
- Mind troubleshooters: stress* (Mind 2003) 50p
- Mind troubleshooters: panic attacks* (Mind 2002) 50p
- The nature of unhappiness* D. Smail (Constable and Robinson 2001) £10.99
- Understanding anxiety* (Mind 2002) £1
- Understanding bereavement* (Mind 2003) £1
- Understanding depression* (Mind 2003) £1
- Understanding dissociative disorders* (Mind 2003) £1
- Understanding eating distress* (Mind 2002) £1
- Understanding gender dysphoria* (Mind 1999) £1
- Understanding self-harm* (Mind 2003) £1
- Understanding talking treatments* (Mind 2002) £1

Order form

For a catalogue of publications from Mind, send an A4 SAE to the address below.

If you would like to order any of the titles listed here, please photocopy or tear out these pages, and indicate in the appropriate boxes the number of each title that you require.

Please add 10 per cent for postage and packing, and enclose a cheque for the whole amount, payable to Mind. Return your completed order form together with your cheque to:

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fax: 020 8534 6399
email: publications@mind.org.uk
web: www.mind.org.uk
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Please send me the titles marked opposite. I enclose a cheque (including 10 per cent for p&p) payable to Mind for £

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Mind works for a better life for everyone with experience of mental distress

Mind does this by:

- advancing the views, needs and ambitions of people with experience of mental distress
- promoting inclusion through challenging discrimination
- influencing policy through campaigning and education
- inspiring the development of quality services which reflect expressed need and diversity
- achieving equal civil and legal rights through campaigning and education.

The values and principles which underpin Mind's work are:
autonomy, equality, knowledge, participation and respect.

For details of your nearest Mind association and of local services contact Mind's helpline, *MindinfoLine*: **0845 766 0163** Monday to Friday 9.15am to 5.15pm. Speech-impaired or Deaf enquirers can contact us on the same number (if you are using BT Textdirect, add the prefix 18001). For interpretation, *MindinfoLine* has access to 100 languages via Language Line.

Scottish Association for Mental Health tel. 0141 568 7000

Northern Ireland Association for Mental Health tel. 028 9032 8474

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Mind (National Association for Mental Health)
15-19 Broadway
London E15 4BQ
tel: 020 8519 2122
fax: 020 8522 1725
web: www.mind.org.uk



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