

# Sexual Orientation

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Gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people live in all aspects of our society and work in all companies and organizations. They belong to all economic, racial, and social groups. In many organizations, they hide their identities by allowing people to think they are heterosexual. In such workplaces, they do not feel free to have pictures of their loved ones and families on their desks. When asked about their weekends, they are likely to leave out information. If the workplace is hostile, they may have to endure gay jokes or slurs. Discrimination and prejudice may be more overt, taking the form of threats and abuse. When organizations tolerate homophobic attitudes and behaviors in the workplace, morale and productivity suffer. Creating an inclusive workplace means eliminating homophobic behavior and creating an atmosphere of tolerance and acceptance. It also includes valuing the family relationships of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people in the same way that the organization does for heterosexual people.

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Discussions about sexual orientation are difficult for a number of reasons. They involve talking about sexual orientation, different values, competing beliefs, and diverse opinions. In general these types of discussions make people uncomfortable, especially in workplace environments. For some, their faith communities have definite views on issues of sexual orientation. Ultimately, gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender individuals seek communication with heterosexual co-workers in an effort to socially integrate their families with working lives: to be who they are and to talk as openly and honestly as heterosexual people do about their families, friends, and their basic life activities. The purpose of having discussions about sexual orientation and differences is to gain knowledge and understanding about others so they may be socially integrated into the workplace.

In American society, heterosexual men and women enjoy membership in a dominant group. Gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people make up the subordinated group. Heterosexual relationships are seen as “normal” and healthy; this perception is reinforced by movies, television shows, and social conventions. To be a member of this subordinated group means you are likely to experience confusion and shame as you recognize your attraction to the same gender. There are no or few role models for you in your family or school. You may have very little information available to you about what you are experiencing. If you are able to find resources, you are careful about using them publicly. The people who make up your community—your family, friends, teachers, counselors and coaches—are likely to make the assumption that you belong to the dominant heterosexual group. You may be expected to date someone of the opposite gender, marry, and have children. When you enter the workforce, most people you work with will assume you are heterosexual.

If you decide to “come out,” you may be faced with “additional” discrimination and rejection. The act of telling family, friends, and coworkers can be emotional and difficult. You would have to assess if it is “safe” to be yourself with a co-worker. If you decide to keep your sexual orientation private, you would not be able to talk about your partner or bring him or her to company events. You may even have to lie about your family life and perpetually worry about being discovered.

The dominant group, heterosexual men and women who are not allies, like to argue the “cause” of sexual orientation; however, this is rarely a discussion about the origins of being heterosexual. This argument is often centered on homosexuality as a state of being that the individual chooses. While this argument continues to surface, almost no gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender people have any question about whether they chose their orientation.

As the dominant group works towards knowledge and understanding, it is helpful to be clear about words that are used in connection with sexual orientation. The meanings of words shift and change. Therefore, the current usage for some of these terms should be identified.

## **Definition of terms**

**Gender** is the biological sex to which we are born, either male or female.

**Gender identity** is how we perceive ourselves and what we call ourselves. It is a term that refers to the inherent, self-perceived gender we were born with. For transgender individuals, it is not the same as their biological gender.

**Gender role** (sometimes called **sex role**) is what the culture expects of us because of our biological sex. We play a role as a boy or as a girl, as a man or a woman, in response to norms for our gender. Gender roles vary from culture to culture and during different times.

**Sexual orientation** refers to a specific orientation to feeling attracted to one or both genders. One’s sexual orientation determines their primary emotional, physical, and sexual attraction.

**Sexual behavior** is used to describe what people actually do, regardless of their orientation. Not everyone engages in sexual behavior, and people sometimes engage in behaviors that are not consistent with their sexual orientation, for reasons ranging from experimentation to social pressure and obligation.

**Sexual orientation identity** is what we call ourselves – gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and heterosexual.

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**Homosexual**, coined in the 1880s, is the sexual orientation of people whose primary emotional, physical, and sexual attraction is for people of the same gender.

**Gay** is the preferred term to use when referring to men whose primary emotional, physical, and sexual attraction is to other men. While some people use “gay” as an umbrella term to refer to all gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people, it is

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***In order to create a safe and inclusive environment for all people in the workplace, there are some things both the dominant group and the subordinated group can do to foster understanding and acceptance. When heterosexual men and women become allies in the workplace, gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender persons can bring their full selves and attention to the work of the company or organization.***

more accurate to use the more specific terms “gay men,” “lesbian women,” “bisexual men and women,” and “transgender persons.”

**Lesbian** is a term that refers to women whose primary emotional, physical, and sexual attraction is to other women. Most women prefer to be called lesbians, rather than “gay women.”

**Bisexual** is a term that refers to people who have emotional, physical, and sexual attractions to both women and men. Whether they happen to be partnered or attracted to either a man or a woman at any particular time, their sexual orientation is “bisexual.”

**Transgender** refers to a person whose gender identity or expression differs from conventional expectations for his or her biological gender. Transgender individuals may be in various stages of “transition” to bring their appearances and biological system in line with their orientation. This may include wearing clothes and/or makeup of their inherent gender, undergoing hormone treatments to effect physical alterations, and having surgical genital reassignment. The term transgender is used to describe several distinct but related groups of people who use a variety of other terms to “self-identify.” Like other people, transgender people can be straight, gay, lesbian or bisexual. transgender people can include transsexuals, masculine women, feminine men, drag queens/king, cross-dressers, gender queers, two-spirit, butches, transmen, transwomen, etc.

**Homophobia** is the fear, hatred, and intolerance of people who are gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender. These intense prejudicial feelings often result in both discrimination and harassment.

**Heterosexism** refers to organizational and societal forms of discrimination and oppression toward gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people based upon prejudice and assumptions that the dominant group—in this case heterosexual people and heterosexuality—represents the right, “normal” dynamic.

**Out** is a term referring to gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender people who share information about their sexual orientation.

**Closeted or in the closet** is when a gays, lesbians, bisexuals, or transgender individuals keep their sexual orientation a secret and also requires others to keep it secret.

**Outing** someone means to disclose that person’s sexual orientation without his or her permission.

**Coming out** is a term that has several meanings. It refers to the overall developmental process that gays, lesbians, bisexuals, and transgender people experience as they come to terms with their sexual orientation and move from feelings of internalized homophobia towards self-acceptance. **Coming out** also means to tell someone else about your sexual orientation.

**Straight** is a slang term for heterosexual.

**Ally** describes a heterosexual man or woman who is actively working to change homophobia and heterosexism in themselves and in their spheres of influence.

In order to create a safe and inclusive environment for all people in the workplace, there are some things both the dominant group and the subordinated group can do to foster understanding and acceptance. When heterosexual men and women become allies in the workplace, gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender persons can bring their full selves and attention to the work of the company or organization.

***Share equal responsibility for communication with gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender co-workers. Work together to build rapport and trust.***

### ***What you can do if you identify as heterosexual***

- Remember that while gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people comprise a community and share that they are “different” in their sexual orientation or gender identity, there are differences among individuals. Some are introverted and some are extroverted; some are single and some are coupled; some have children and some do not; some live together as a couple and some live apart; some have had commitment ceremonies, others haven't; some are accepted and included by their families, while some are excluded and rejected; some are very private people and some are very open, and so on.
- Learn definitions of words associated with the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender communities. Familiarize yourself with terminology and practice using that language so you get comfortable with it. Do not use slang in a pejorative manner to describe an individual's sexual orientation or gender identity.
- Make efforts to be inclusive of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender co-workers. Welcome their partners or guests when you meet them, and include them in conversation. Be aware of your feelings toward them as individuals and as a group.
- Expect some members of these communities to be defensive or shy due to past negative experiences or fears related to telling people about their sexual orientation or gender identity. Try to understand, and do not take it personally.
- Refrain from using judgmental language such as, “I just don't understand your lifestyle.” Statements like this will create barriers.
- Discourage others from telling jokes about people who are gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender, and refrain from telling them yourself.
- Share equal responsibility for communication with gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender co-workers. Work together to build rapport and trust.
- Spend time with someone who is gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender (does not have to be a co-worker) and get to know what this person's life is like while letting him or her know what your life is like.
- Attend gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender events and activities to learn more about their communities. Reading is another good way to educate yourself.
- Keep in mind that some people, regardless of their sexual orientation or gender identity, tend to share personal information only when asked; others prefer not to be asked. Respect each individual's right to privacy even when you ask a sincere question.

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### **What you can do if you identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender**

- Make the personal choice to be out to the extent to which you are comfortable: be clear with others about what that means and let them know when your comfort level changes.
- Be honest about whether or not you want people to ask you questions. If you choose to tell others about your sexual orientation or gender identity, you must clearly communicate your wishes regarding confidentiality. Otherwise, someone might assume it's all right to share information about your personal life that you wish they hadn't.
- Be patient, non-sarcastic and non-defensive for the sake of establishing open communication. Assume that most people are sincere about wanting to learn more about you, and about communicating with you and other gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people without being offensive. Help them to do this.
- Let others know (especially human resources and/or management) if you experience discrimination or harassment related to your sexual orientation or gender identity. Help them to address the problem and find a solution.
- Be inclusive of heterosexual, gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender co-workers. For instance, invite them to bring their partners or guests to activities and events. Be aware of your own feelings about the gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender communities.
- Share equal responsibility for communication with heterosexual co-workers. Work together to build rapport and trust.
- Be open with heterosexual people about your life when they express interest, and be willing to learn the particulars of their individual lives. Remember that not all heterosexual people are “the same” or have lives and family structures that fit the heterosexual stereotype of “breeders.”
- Make an effort to be inclusive of your heterosexual co-workers. Welcome their partners and guests when you meet them and include them in the conversation. Be aware of your feelings about them as individuals and as a group.

### **What EVERYONE should do**

- Ask individuals who are heterosexual, gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender what terminology they prefer when you are referring to them or talking with them. Be sensitive about the words used, and base them on individual preferences.
- If you want to know something about a person's sexual orientation, gender identity, or personal life, ask him or her directly, rather than asking others.
- When someone shares information with you about his or her sexual orientation or gender identity, clarify with the person whether or not this is information he or she wants you to keep confidential. Don't “out” people to others. If others ask you about a person's sexual orientation or gender identification, consider responding with something like, “That's pretty personal; you will have to ask him or her yourself,” or “I've never asked him that particular question.”

- Avoid making assumptions about people's sexual orientation or gender identity based on their appearance or behavior. Don't assume that a person's spouse or partner is of the opposite sex.

By working together with a greater awareness and sensitivity, we will be able to make the workplace a comfortable and inclusive environment for everyone.

***Avoid making assumptions about people's sexual orientation or gender identity based on their appearance or behavior.***

### **Suggested Reading**

Blumenfeld, Warren J. (1992). *"Homophobia: How We All Pay the Price."* Boston: Beacon Press Books.

Jukuri, Stephen D. (2003). *"Understanding GLBT: An Introduction to the Lives, History, and Politics of Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender People."* Paper presented to the Board of the Council for World Class Communities, Benton Harbor, MI.

McNaught, Brian (1993). *"Gay Issues in the Workplace."* New York: St. Martin's Press.

Obear, Kathy, (2003). Orientation definitions based on her workshop presentations and conversations .