

WHAT IS IT LIKE TO BE YOUNG AND LESBIAN?

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

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

There is no "right" or "wrong" way to be a lesbian. Lesbians come in all shapes and sizes, from all occupations and with all levels of education. Your sexual orientation is only one part of who you are. Because of homophobia and prejudice, some people don't accept lesbians and gay men. Gay and lesbian youth often face discrimination and violence, and because of this, many organizations work for lesbian and gay civil rights.

MAKING CONTACT

You may be ready to find out more. Start by reading. If you feel comfortable, ask the librarian in your public library. If your library does not have much on sexuality, or if you aren't comfortable requesting them in person, call the Family Resource Connection at 1-800-298-4321. Books and videos will be mailed to you at no cost, along with a postage paid mailer to return them. This service is free and confidential. Another way to obtain information is to check out the Lesbian/Gay section of a large bookstore. The Southern NH HIV/AIDS Task Force and the PFLAG NH Chapters in Concord and on the Seacoast offer confidential lending libraries of gay-positive books and videos.

There are several organizations listed in this brochure that will provide you with accurate, current and specific HIV/AIDS information, along with a counselling and support.

PFLAG NH has a Helpline (800) 750-2524 and HEADREST has a teen info-line (800) 639-6095.

Both will let you talk about your feelings and will direct you to other organizations that help gay people.

HOW DO WE LEARN TO LIKE OURSELVES?

Developing self-esteem is very important for young people. We all have a right to feel good about ourselves. It's difficult for lesbian and gay youth to do so because many people around us believe that we're sick, perverted and destined to live unhappy lives.

When we feel we have to hide who we really are, it can make us feel like harming ourselves through drugs, alcohol or suicide. We may feel very isolated, fearful and depressed, especially if we've had no one to talk to about being a lesbian.

More and more we, as young lesbians are learning to like who we are. It helps to read books about lesbians who are leading fulfilling lives. Meeting other lesbians also helps because we can find out that lesbians are as diverse as any other group of people. Remember, just as it's normal and natural to be heterosexual, it's normal and natural to be lesbian.

Other NH Gay-Positive Resources:

So. NH HIV / AIDS Task Force	(603) 595-8464
PFLAG NH Helpline	(800) 750-2524
Youth Support Groups:	
Concord Outright	(603) 224-2407
Manchester Outright	(603) 537-7004
Seacoast Outright	(603) 431-1013
Nashua Outright	(603) 889-8210
Headrest Teenline	(800) 639-6095

This brochure was written by Kevin Cranston and Cooper Thompson, with help from members of BAGLY, Boston Area Gay and Lesbian Youth. Produced and distributed by the Campaign to End Homophobia, a network of people who work to end homophobia through information sharing and education. Revisions were completed by Outright Vermont. The current revision was completed by PFLAG NH.

GROWING UP LESBIAN

A BROCHURE FOR YOUNG WOMEN

Information for gay youth and young women about their sexuality

Parents, Families, and Friends of Lesbians and Gays is dedicated to preserving families in loving relationships, to educating an ill-informed public and to advocating for full civil rights for gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people.

PFLAG NH

PO Box 957, Concord, NH 03302
Helpline (800) 750-2524 (NH only)

www.pflagnh.org
admin@pflagnh.org

For information about PFLAG presentations in schools, church groups, health care & social service organizations, call (603) 528-6175.

PFLAG NH thanks Southern NH HIV/AIDS Task Force for permission to reproduce and distribute this brochure.

Revision 2002

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE A LESBIAN?

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

As lesbians, we are not alone. Lesbians are teachers, doctors, factory workers, police officers, movie stars, mothers, and novelists. Lesbians are part of your community.

HOW DO I KNOW IF I'M A LESBIAN?

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

You may notice that you feel turned on by other women. You may feel different from your girlfriends. When your girlfriends are checking out boys, you may find yourself checking out girls. Going out with boys may not interest you.

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

You may feel confused because you're attracted to men and women. That's OK. Some women have relationships with both men and women through their lives. Some may later decide to be exclusively lesbian or heterosexual. Our sexuality develops over time. Don't worry if you're unsure.

AM I NORMAL?

Yes, you are normal. It's perfectly natural for people to be attracted to members of their own gender but it's not something that's always accepted in our society. Many people push away these feelings because of prejudice against lesbians and gay men. Most scientific experts agree that a person's sexual orientation is determined at a very young age, maybe even before birth. It's normal and healthy to be yourself, whether you're lesbian, gay or straight. What's really important is that we learn to like ourselves.

"We're told that it's sick, or perverted, or sinful, or abnormal. But the people who tell us that are the same people who say that women belong in the kitchen, that Black people are inferior, and that handicapped people are useless." Terry, age 16

DO I HAVE TO WORRY ABOUT AIDS?

All of us should know about HIV, the virus that causes AIDS – how it is transmitted and how we can prevent ourselves from being infected. You and your partner should discuss your risk factors for HIV infection and decide what, if any, safer sex method you should use.

To reduce your risk of getting AIDS:

- Do not share needles from injection drugs
- Don't have intercourse with men without using a latex condom
- While oral sex between women is low-risk behavior, some women choose to use a barrier-like latex or plastic wrap
- Choosing not to have sex is always OK and is the most effective way to prevent HIV infection.

WHOM SHOULD I TELL?

More and more lesbian and gay youth are learning to feel better about themselves. As you start to listen to your deepest feelings and learn more about what it means to be lesbian, you will begin to be comfortable with your sexuality. This is the process called *coming out*.

The first step in coming out is to tell yourself that you are lesbian and say, "That's O.K." Later you may want to tell someone else, someone you trust to be understanding and sympathetic. You might choose a friend or an adult. You will probably want to meet other lesbian youth for friendship or a more intimate relationship. Some youth are able to come out to their families. You need to decide whether or not to tell your family, and to choose the right time.

It is crucial to be honest with yourself. Just as self-denial costs you, coming out pays off. Most young people who accept their sexuality say they feel calmer, happier and more confident.

It is important to have someone to talk to because it's not normal or healthy for young people to have to keep secret such an important part of their lives. Remember, Headrest has a gay-positive Teen Info Line and PFLAG NH has a listing of safe people with whom you may talk.

WHAT ABOUT SEX?

Just because you're turned on to someone, doesn't mean you're ready to have sex. You have to feel emotionally ready. It's important that the two people talk about what they are comfortable with. There's no need to rush things. It will come in time.

In our society, women aren't encouraged to talk openly about sex. However, it's important to communicate about what we like and don't like sexually and to talk about different expectations we may have in the relationship. It's also important to talk about whether we're at risk for HIV, AIDS, or other sexually transmitted diseases, like herpes.

You will know when the time is right to have sex. What counts is that whatever form of sexual expression you decide on, it should feel right for you and your partner.