

Q & A About Gender Identity

What Causes a Person to Have a Particular Gender Identity?

The fact of the matter is that nobody really knows. There are many different theories ranging from genetic (nobody has found a gene for gender identity, transgender or transsexuality) to changes in brain structure (although there is no evidence yet) to hormonal effects in the uterus while the baby is developing, and finally to social and even evolutionary factors. Like most things, gender identity is probably defined through a collection of complex interactions between many variables. In the end, no particular cause/factor has been found to fully support any of these theories.

Is Gender Identity a Choice?

The answer is that we just don't know, although all of the research and clinical evidence seems to be leaning to no.

Can Therapy Change Gender Identity?

Even though many people have tried, there are numerous research and clinical results showing that gender identity is fixed at a very young age. Some people claim that it could be as early as two years of age. Others state that it is closer to four years of age. Some transgendered individuals seek to change their gender identity through therapy. Frequently, family members or religious groups coerce these individuals to change or stay. The reality is that transgender is not an illness. It does not require treatment to change it. It is simply not changeable. Examples of people who claim to have changed their orientation usually indicate someone who has changed their behavior in response to internal or external pressure to be heterosexual. This is often at great cost to self, because basic feelings haven't changed.

Are people gay because they were sexually abused?

Most people who were sexually abused do not take on a gay identity. Gay and lesbian people, just as heterosexuals, may have been abused, but this has no relation to their sexual orientation.

Don't gay persons sexually molest children?

Being gay is not linked to molestation. Approximately 95% of child molesters are heterosexual men. A molester who abuses boys is not usually gay--many will abuse children of either gender.

Can gay people have stable or long relationships?

Yes. Even though gay and lesbian relationships do not have the social supports which heterosexual relationships have, many gays and lesbians form long-term, monogamous, stable relationships and consider themselves to have a lifetime commitment to each other. Many heterosexual people have trouble forming stable relationships; so do some gay, lesbian and bisexual people.

If a person has sex with opposite sex, then how can they be gay?

Many people do not realize they are gay until later in life, partly because of the negative views our society holds of gay people. Prior to this they may have heterosexual relationships. Some gays and lesbians also engage in heterosexual relationships in an effort to hide or deny their

gay/lesbian identity. And many people are not exclusively either heterosexual or homosexual. They may find themselves attracted to people of either gender. At different times they may engage in both heterosexual and homosexual relationships.

Is being gay a mental illness?

The APA has determined that being gay is not a mental illness. Research has shown that being homosexual is not associated with emotional or social problems. However, many LGB people experience distress due to oppression and homophobia. Objective scientific research over the past 35 years has consistently shown that homosexual orientation, in and of itself, is not associated with emotional or social problems.

In 1973, the American Psychiatric Association removed the term "homosexuality" from the official manual that lists all mental and emotional disorders. In 1975, the American Psychological Association took the same action. Both associations urge all mental health professionals to help dispel the stigma of mental illness that some people still associate with LGBTQ orientation.