

Sexuality, gender identity and depression

It's a sad fact that people who are seen as different to the 'norm' often face discrimination and bullying, and if they don't get support and respect from friends and family, this can set them up for becoming depressed. This is often the case for people who are attracted to people of the same sex or who don't seem to fit mainstream ideas of what a 'real woman' or 'real man' is.

Sexual orientation is a term that refers to who a person is attracted to.

Sexual orientation can be Homosexual (same sex, also known as gay or lesbian)
Heterosexual (opposite sex, also known as straight)
Bisexual (both sexes).

Gender identity is a term that refers to a person's own sense of being male or female, or something other or in between. It may or may not correspond to their sex (biological make up, such as the body and chromosomes). A person's gender identity doesn't necessarily have anything to do with their sexual orientation.

Some other words people use to describe themselves include:

Transgender A person who was assigned a gender at birth, based on their genitals, but who feel that this is a false or incomplete description of themselves. The term transgender can include, for example, transsexuals, cross-dressers and fa'afafine.

Transsexual Someone who has the enduring and compelling desire to live in the opposite sex to the one they were born with.

Fa'afafine A Samoan term which literally means "like a woman". Fa'afafine are biological males who express feminine gender identities in different ways.

Takatāpui A term that many Māori lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people have adopted.

Queer A reclaimed word that represents sexuality and gender diversity. Often used as an umbrella term for people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or somewhere in between and/or not sure.

What determines a person's sexual orientation and gender identity?

It is not known what determines a person's sexual orientation or gender identity. One theory is that they are determined by genetic or biological factors; other theories claim that they are determined by environmental factors. In any case, a person's sexual orientation and gender identity seem to often be established by a very early age.

Studies show that attempts to change one's sexual orientation are usually unsuccessful and often lead to increased depression and even suicide. Statistics show that most people do not see any reason to change. Some lesbian and gay people, however, find that accepting their sexual orientation is difficult, given the prejudice that they often have to deal with.

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How does sexuality impact on depression?

Young people who are not heterosexual or whose gender identity differs from the 'norm' often face stigmatisation, harassment, and even psychological and physical abuse at home, at school, and in society at large. These experiences can impact on their well being and opportunities for future success.

Research has shown that queer youth have greater levels of depression and that this can also have a negative effect on how well they do in school.

Queer young people have higher rates of suicide attempts, victimisation in school violence, drug and alcohol abuse, early onset of sexual behavior, eating disorders, and teenage pregnancy than other youth.

Hasn't society changed?

New Zealand society has changed a lot over the last 20 years, and this is reflected in legislation that makes it illegal to discriminate against people on the basis of their sexuality or gender identity. People in same sex relationships now have the same legal rights and obligations as those in heterosexual relationships, and different sexualities and ways of expressing gender are a lot more acceptable these days.

However it can still be pretty tough growing up and going to school for those who are seen as different. It doesn't have to be. If you have any questions or are looking for support, then don't hesitate to contact the following organisations.

To find out more:

Rainbow Youth: is an Auckland-based organisation providing support, contact, information, advocacy and education for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, takatāpui and fa'afafine young people and their families/whanau. www.rainbowyouth.org.nz

Out There National Queer Youth Development Project: provides resources and education, and supports the development of youth groups. www.outthere.org.nz

Out Line / Gayline - Lesbianline: is a helpline for issues around sexual and gender identity. Provides information,

support, a listening ear and referrals. It's anonymous and confidential. 10am to 10pm weekdays or 5pm to 10pm weekends/public holidays. In Auckland Ph 303 3584. Outside Auckland freephone to the HIV/AIDS Hotline Ph 0800 802 437 and connect for free to Outline by pressing '8'. www.gayline.org.nz

Text The Lowdown team for free on 5626.

Email The Lowdown team in the Chat section of www.thelowdown.co.nz. You can also ask them to give you a call back if you want to talk on the phone.