

Gender and Sexuality for Those Who Identify as LGBTQ

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TALKING ABOUT GENDER & SEXUALITY

SEXUAL VIOLENCE & INDIVIDUALS WHO IDENTIFY AS LGBTQ

Language can inform and liberate. Words also have the power to shut someone out or hold them down. Many different social forces impact the way we understand the words we use; for example, advocates debate using terms like “victim” or “survivor” to describe a person who lived through violence. Language is powerful in all anti-sexual violence work. It is especially important when working with individuals who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer or questioning (LGBTQ), and their communities.

As you proceed through this guide, think about ways you can incorporate the following practices in your work:

1. *Respect how people self-identify, however that may be.*
2. *Use the information provided here to educate others on language, challenge hate speech, and create a safe and inclusive environment.*

Throughout this and other resources, the acronym “LGBTQ” is used to refer to individuals who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or queer. The acronym “LGBTQ” encompasses many people and communities with diverse experiences and backgrounds. While it is important to define the terms you

use in your work in order to educate others and avoid confusion, it should be acknowledged that the acronym LGBTQ is limited and can be both informative and oppressive, sometimes in the same breath. We understand that individuals and communities may not identify with this term and prefer other ways of describing their experiences. We support the philosophy and approach of meeting individuals and communities where they are and using the language they choose to describe their experiences. Readers are encouraged to have these conversations with their local communities and with the individuals they serve to promote a better understanding and more trusting relationship.

Starting with the critical concepts of sex, gender, sexual orientation and gender identity can help to inform sexual violence prevention, intervention and response within LGBTQ communities (Siragusa, 2001).

Sex: Is a biological term referring to the genitalia and/or reproductive anatomy a person has at birth. Society generally considers just two sexes, male and female. However, some people are born with both male and female or ambiguous anatomy.

Gender: Is a societal construct, defined by expectations of the ways men and women should dress, talk, or act. Our culture strongly promotes the idea of two genders, male or

female, also known as a gender binary (binary meaning having only two options). This discourages people from mixing or crossing prescribed gender lines, or from creating another form of gender expression altogether. In reality, many people identify in more complex ways than one gender or another.

Sexual orientation: Refers to a person's emotional, physical, spiritual and sexual attraction to individuals of the same gender, another gender or both/all genders and how people organize their lives around these desires.

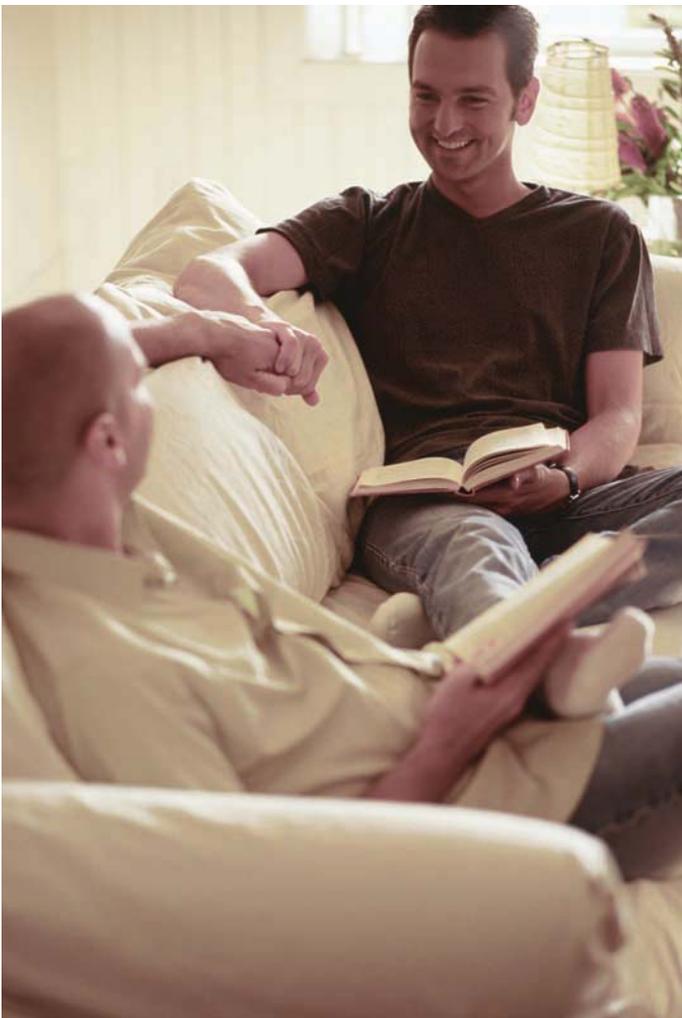
Gender identity: Describes how and to what degree a person identifies with the continuum of masculinity and femininity, or identifies outside of the gender binary.

People describe their sexual orientation and gender identity in many ways. All people have a sexual orientation and a gender identity, but because of social norms and inequalities, some people have established specific terms to describe themselves. There are five terms that are commonly used in mainstream American culture: Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer. Lesbian, gay, and bisexual are terms that describe a person's sexual orientation. Transgender is a term that describes a person's gender identity. Queer, a broad term, can encompass any or all of these. Definitions for these terms vary.

Lesbian: A woman who is predominately or exclusively emotionally, physically, spiritually and/or sexually attracted to women.

Gay: A man who is predominantly or exclusively emotionally, physically, spiritually and/or sexually attracted to men.

Bisexual: A person who is emotionally, physically, spiritually and/or sexually attracted to women and men.

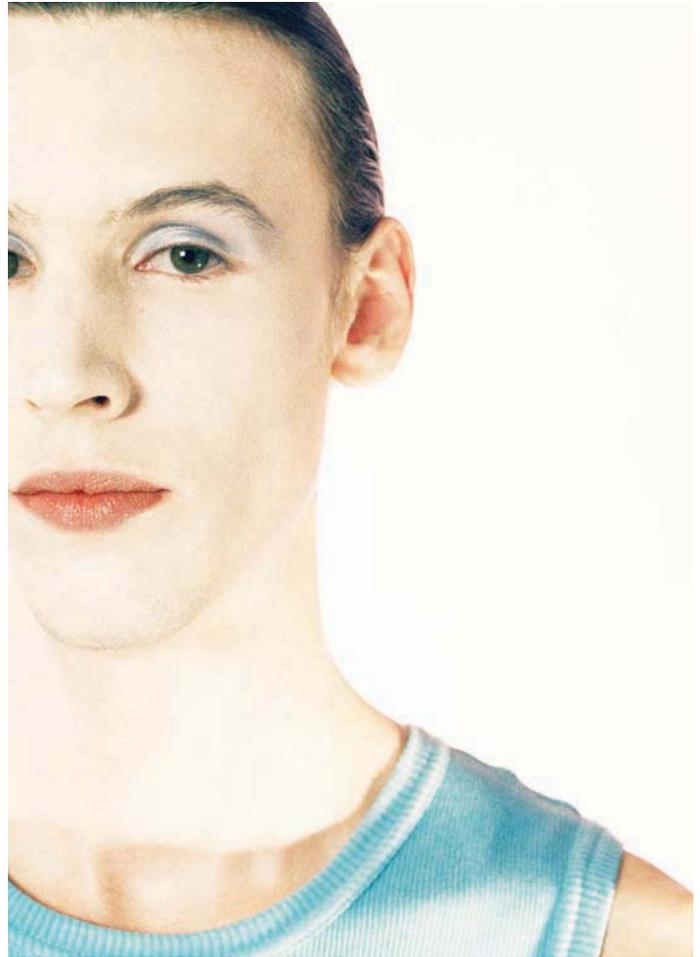


Transgender: Often used as an umbrella term to encompass a wide range of people whose gender identity or expression may not match the category our society has placed them in. There are some within the gender-non-conforming community that do not identify as transgender. Some people identify as bi-gendered, at certain times they identify as a man and at other times as a woman. Some people believe that they fall “between” genders, not identifying fully, or strictly, as either male or female. “Transgender” is sometimes used to include people who self-identify as transsexual, intersex, two-spirit, gender-queer, drag queens, cross dressers, and others. People who are transgender may be lesbian, gay, bisexual or heterosexual.

Queer: Is a term that is often used as an umbrella term for all people who do not conform to rigid notions of gender and sexuality. In the United States, it has historically been a negative term used against people perceived to be LGBTQ, however “queer” has more recently been reclaimed by some people as a positive, empowering term.

Cisgender: Is a person whose assigned sex at birth matches their identity and assigned gender. For example, someone who was assigned female at birth and is comfortable living and presenting as female may identify as a cisgender woman. This term is used in many transgender-inclusive and aware communities to challenge the notion that transgender is “abnormal.” Instead, they reflect the view that there is a broad range of gender experience, rather than one “normal” one.

The terms “homosexual” and “homosexuality” were used by the American Psychological Association (APA) to classify people who identify as lesbian and gay as having a mental



illness until 1974. At that time, they released information concluding that “homosexuality” was not a mental illness and that those who are lesbian and gay should not be treated as if they have a mental illness. Because of the word’s previous degrading classification, many people who identify as lesbian or gay do not want to be associated with the term. This word, although it describes a sexual orientation, should not be used to describe an individual. For example, “Samantha is a homosexual” is offensive and hurtful, while “Samantha identifies as a lesbian” affirms and is person-centered.

People who identify as LGBTQ come from all racial, ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds and represent the full spectrum of social, religious and political perspectives. These



backgrounds and perspectives can shape and influence self-perceptions of gender identity and orientation. They can also influence the perceptions of others. There are generational and cultural differences in the terms people use to describe identities. Some people may feel that another term better represents their identity. Some people may not feel safe or comfortable identifying with any of these terms. To help inform the work of sexual assault advocates, activists, counselors, and educators, some related definitions and terms are described below.

Ally: Typically refers to any person who does not identify as LGBTQ but supports and actively stands up for the rights of LGBTQ communities.

Anti-LGBTQ bias and oppression: This includes hatred and contempt of people who identify as LGBTQ based on prejudicial beliefs held to be true by the dominant culture and perpetuated by society's various institutions.

Biphobia: The aversion to and irrational fear of feelings of love for and/or sexual attraction to people of both sexes.

Coming out: A process or series of events that some lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer people experience as they tell themselves, family, friends, and society about their sexual orientation or gender identity. For individuals identifying as LGBTQ, the coming-out process can be both difficult and liberating.

Cross-dresser: Sometimes called just "dressers," may be men who dress as women or women who dress as men, though men who identify as cross-dressers are more common, probably because society is more tolerant of women dressing in male clothing. An older term for cross-dresser is transvestite. Cross-dressers will not always be dressed as the other gender – they might only dress for certain situations or environments. They do not usually identify as transgender – most men who cross-dress identify as straight men.

Drag queen/king: A drag queen is a man who entertains/performs as a female. A drag king is a woman who entertains/performs as a man. People who participate in drag often have stage personas that exaggerate gender stereotypes. These stage personalities are generally separate from their own gender identities, which are often in line with their assigned genders. It is becoming increasingly common for transgender people to perform in drag, but their identities are still separate from their stage personas when they are offstage.

Female to male (FTM) or male to female (MTF): The descriptors male to female (MTF) and female to male (FTM) are often used in medical and sociological literature to describe people who identify as transgender. Sometimes people use them to describe themselves. Many people who identify as transgender prefer the terms “trans man” (same as FTM) or “trans woman” (same as MTF) because these terms affirm their chosen identities. Younger people may call themselves “trans guys/boys” or “trans girls.”

Gender binary: Our culture strongly promotes the idea of two genders, male or female. This discourages people from mixing or crossing prescribed gender lines, or from creating another form of gender expression altogether. In reality, many people identify on a gender spectrum or in gender spheres outside of the typical binary genders.

Gender dysphoria: A term used by the medical community. It refers to a person’s discomfort within their assigned gender.

Genderqueer: Some people identify as genderqueer because their gender identity is androgynous. Some use the term bi-gendered to describe themselves. Others identify as nongendered. Some people use the term genderqueer because they oppose the binary gender system. Genderqueer can be a political term.

Gender variant/Gender nonconforming: Gender variant can include anyone who does not adhere to traditional binary gender roles or gender expression. Gender nonconforming can include anyone who does not conform to gender stereotypes.

Hate crime: Crimes that manifest evidence of prejudice based on race, religion, disability,

sexual orientation, perceived immigration status or ethnicity, including, but not limited to the crimes of murder, non-negligent manslaughter, forcible rape, aggravated assault, simple assault, intimidation, arson, and destruction, damage or vandalism of property.

Hate-motivated violence: Any verbal and physical attack on people or property. These include but are not limited to hate crimes. Many acts of hate-motivated violence, such as hate speech, are not illegal, but may still have serious and traumatic impacts on the individuals who experience them, as well as on their friends, families, and communities.

Heterosexism: A belief system that assumes that everyone is heterosexual and that heterosexuality is the only acceptable, natural or moral mode of sexual identity and expression.



Heterosexual/Straight: The sexual orientation in which a person's emotional, physical, spiritual and/or sexual attraction is to individuals of the opposite sex. For example, a biological and self-identifying woman who is attracted to biological self-identified men.

Homophobia: An intense aversion to, and irrational fear of, perceived or implied homosexuality. It often includes hatred and contempt and is composed of unfounded and prejudicial beliefs held to be true by the dominant culture and perpetuated by society's various institutions.

Internalized homophobia: Hatred of one's own sexual orientation resulting from societal oppression of people who identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender and queer.

Inter-sex: A general term used for a variety of conditions in which a person is born with a

reproductive or sexual anatomy that doesn't seem to fit the typical definitions of female or male, or who has chromosomal structures other than just XX or XY. Gender identity and expression are unrelated to intersex status.

Misogyny: A cultural norm or attitude of hatred, dislike and/or mistrust of women or people with stereotypically feminine characteristics.

Questioning: A term that can refer to an identity or to a process of introspection whereby people learn about their own gender identity or sexual orientation. They are often seeking information and support during this stage of their identity development. This process can happen at any age and/or multiple times throughout someone's life.

Same Gender Loving (SGL): A term created by African Americans and used by some people of color who view the labels "gay " and "lesbian" as representative of an LGBTQ community historically dominated by white people.

Sexual identity: How a person views themselves in terms of biologically assigned sex: male, female, or in between/a combination.

Sexual orientation binary: A strictly either/or perspective on intimate relationships and human sexuality: A person is emotionally and sexually attracted to either women or men. However, research shows that human sexuality is much more fluid than the simple gay-straight binary. In fact, many people are neither exclusively one or the other.

Sexual violence: Occurs whenever a person is forced, coerced, and/or manipulated into any unwanted sexual activity, including when the person is unable to consent due to age, illness, disability, or the influence of alcohol or other drugs. Sexual violence includes but is not





limited to rape, incest, child sexual abuse, ritual abuse, nonstranger rape, statutory rape, marital or partner rape, sexual exploitation and trafficking, unwanted sexual contact, sexual harassment, exposure, and voyeurism. Sexual violence is a crime typically motivated by the desire to control, humiliate, dominate and/or harm. It is often interconnected with other forms of violence and oppression.

Transphobia: An extreme and intense aversion to and irrational fear and dread of people who transgress social expectations of gender conformity. It often includes hatred and contempt and is composed of unfounded and prejudicial beliefs held to be true by the dominant culture and perpetuated by society's various institutions.

Transsexual: Transsexual is an older term that was historically used to identify those who had undergone surgical procedures to change their sex, but some people who identify as transsexual have not had surgeries, and many people who have had surgeries do not identify as transsexual. Some may choose to transition in order for their physical presentation to better align with their inner gender identity. This transition may or may not include genital reassignment surgery and/or hormonal therapy. It is important to note that not all people need to undergo medical transition in order to feel at home in their bodies, and not all people have equal access to the resources necessary to transition.

Transvestite: A person who wears clothes identified with the opposite gender. Those who define themselves as transvestites are often heterosexual. See similar term cross-dresser.

Two-Spirit: The definition of a Two-Spirit person varies across the Native American cultures in which they appear. In general, Two-Spirit people are born one sex, and end up fulfilling the roles assigned to both sexes, in addition to roles reserved for Two-Spirit people. They are considered part male and part female (or wholly male and wholly female), often revered as natural peacemakers as well as healers and shamans. The term “Berdache,” coined by European explorers to describe people whose gender they did not understand, was replaced by “Two-Spirit,” a term Two-Spirit people use to refer to themselves.

Victim/survivor: Refers to those who have experienced sexual violence at some point in their lifetime. Some people prefer the word survivor, others prefer the word victim. In conversations and resources these two words are often used interchangeably to be inclusive of the various ways people who have experienced sexual violence may identify. The use of person-first terminology honors and respects the whole person, such as “someone who has been sexually assaulted.” As with individuals who identify as LGBTQ, all people should ultimately choose the language that is used to describe their experiences and supports advocacy approaches that are person-centered.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sarah Dawgert, MSW, is a consultant to organizations working to empower communities and increase awareness of issues surrounding women’s health and wellness. Sarah has worked in the anti-poverty and anti-sexual violence movements since 1996. Prior to launching her current consulting firm, Sarah managed the education and volunteer programs at the Boston Area Rape Crisis Center. She also spent several years working with homeless and low-income women and families in San Francisco’s Tenderloin neighborhood. Sarah has trained and coordinated community educators, developed and implemented needs/strengths assessments for service organizations, and facilitated state certification trainings for rape crisis counselors. She has trained on a range of issues related to sexual violence, has spoken at national and local conferences, and has been cited and published in dozens of regional and national media outlets. Sarah has a Bachelor’s Degree in Human Development from Boston College and a Masters of Social Work from Boston University.

THE PROCESS OF COMING OUT

SEXUAL VIOLENCE & INDIVIDUALS WHO IDENTIFY AS LGBTQ

Coming out is the process that some individuals who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer or questioning (LGBTQ) experience as they tell themselves, family, friends, and society about their sexual orientation or gender identity. For individuals who identify as LGBTQ, the coming out process can be both difficult and liberating.

The coming out process is different for everyone. Whether lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer, when coming out, individuals face a unique set of issues based on personal circumstances – including age, location, familial status, class, ethnicity, gender identity, sexual orientation, and countless other factors (Human Rights Campaign [HRC], 2006). Regardless of how someone identifies, a common factor is that each person makes a deeply personal decision about to whom, if anyone, they can confide in about their sexual orientation or gender identity. Most people come out because they reach a point where they are no longer emotionally willing or able to hide such an integral part of who they are

(HRC, 2006). Coming out is an act of bravery, authenticity, and openness (HRC, 2006).

The coming out process can be both difficult and freeing (Parents, Families & Friends of Lesbians & Gays [PFLAG], 2009). It is up to each individual to decide who to confide in, when and how to do it – even if someone is living openly, there may be times when coming out may not be necessary or safe (HRC, 2006).

Throughout the coming out process, it's typical for a person to feel:

- Scared
- Confused
- Vulnerable
- Empowered

- Exhilarated
- Relieved
- Proud
- Uncertain
- Brave
- Affirmed

There are opportunities and risks to coming out that are unique to each individual. Some common advantages and risks as noted by the Human Rights Campaign (2006) follow:



Opportunities associated with coming out

- Developing closer, perhaps more genuine, relationships.
- Building self-esteem from being known and loved for their true selves.
- Reducing the stress of hiding an integral part of their identity.
- Connecting with others who identify as LGBTQ.
- Being part of a strong and vibrant community.
- Helping to break down barriers, myths, and stereotypes about people who identify as LGBTQ.
- Becoming a role model for others.
- Helping youth who identify as LGBTQ feel comfortable about coming out.

Risks of coming out

- Not everyone will be affirming or accepting.
- Family, friends or coworkers may be shocked, confused or even hostile.
- Some relationships may permanently change.
- Some people may experience harassment or discrimination.
- Some young people, especially those under age 18, may be thrown out of their homes or lose financial support from parents.

According to the Human Rights Campaign (2006), there is a coming out continuum with three stages that people move through. For each person it is a little different and people may move between phases. These phases can also happen at different stages of life, for example someone who is out to friends and

family may not choose to be out at work or school.

Stage 1: Coming out to self

A beginning period, when individuals ask themselves questions, moving toward coming out to themselves and perhaps the decision to tell others.

Stage 2: Coming out to others

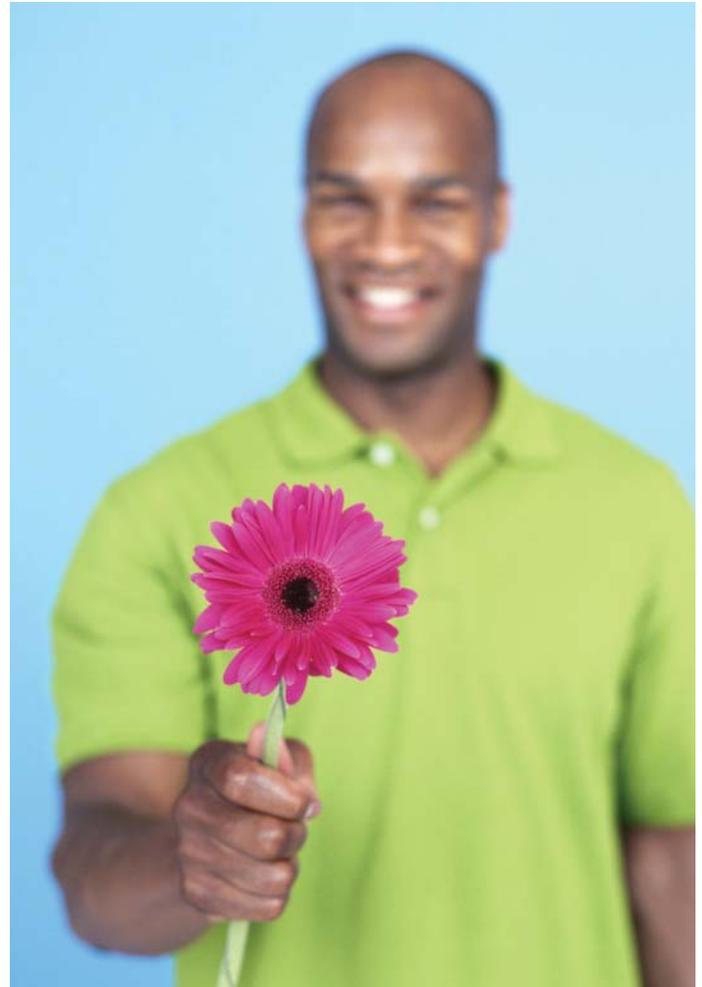
The period when someone is actively talking for the first time about sexual orientation or gender identity with family, friends, coworkers, classmates, and others.

Stage 3: Living out

The ongoing phase after initially talking with the people closest to them, they are now able to tell new people that come into their lives – when it feels appropriate. Negotiating safety is a piece of the coming out process - this is also true of victims of sexual violence and their experiences of reaching out for support. Not all survivors, regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity, feel comfortable disclosing.

This must be kept in mind when serving all survivors; while the coming out process may be empowering and a source of strength for some, for others it may be a barrier to accessing services following a sexual assault. For example:

- A victim may not yet be out to themselves, which can add to the complexities of the healing process, as it will impact how they define what happened to them.
- If someone is just starting the coming out process or is exploring their sexual orientation, a sexual assault by a same sex acquaintance or date may cause them to further question their sexual orientation. For



example, if a gay man is assaulted on one of his first dates with a man, he may wonder, “If this is what gay sex is (violent, fear inducing or shameful), do I really want to do this?”

- People who were not yet out when they were assaulted may question whether they identify as LGBTQ in response to the assault. A person’s gender identity or sexuality is never caused by an act of violence.
- A survivor may fear being outed if the perpetrator was a partner or date. Disclosing circumstances of the assault may force them to come out before they are ready. Disclosure may also force them to be out to people they would normally choose not to be out to, such as law enforcement, medical personnel, or

service providers with whom they work.

- Sometimes people are not out to friends, family members, members of a faith community, or teachers, guidance counselors or other mentors and supports. This limits to whom and how much they can disclose, and sometimes completely closes the door to support.
- Service providers who do not have knowledge of the coming out process or of LGBTQ issues may be insensitive to what a victim/survivor wants to discuss. For example, a provider may focus on the coming out process when that may not be the most pressing issue for the victim/survivor.
- Seeking services at an LGBTQ-identified agency in itself outs a victim. Additionally,

the survivor may also fear being outed by a service provider. For example, youth may fear that a counselor will tell parents or caregivers details of the assault or about struggles with sexual or gender identity.

- Individuals who identify as LGBTQ may blame their assault on their sexual orientation or gender identity. This can lead to conflicted feelings toward oneself and isolation from others.
- For some people, especially individuals who identify as transgender, being out may increase their risk for violence and ridicule.

It may be helpful for victims in the coming out process to know that it's OK to be confused, or to be uncertain about whether (or how) they should come out (PFLAG, 2009). It may also



be helpful for them to know that they are not alone, both in healing from the sexual assault as well as in their coming out process. There are people with similar questions and concerns, and there are people who have already found their own answers (PFLAG, 2009). Additionally, discussing confidentiality may empower a victim/survivor who may be reluctant to discuss details with a counselor or advocate.

For more information about coming out, please visit Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG) at www.pflag.org, or the Human Rights Campaign (HRC) at www.hrc.org. The HRC Coming Out Resource Guides include information and tools for coming out, including making a coming-out plan, telling friends and family, and more. Other guides include specific resources for coming out as bisexual, transgender, in communities of color, in places of worship, and as a straight ally.

ABOUT THIS GUIDE

Throughout this guide, the terms “victim” and “survivor” are used interchangeably to be inclusive of the various ways people who have experienced sexual violence may identify. The Pennsylvania Coalition Against Rape (PCAR) recognizes and supports the use of person-first terminology that honors and respects the whole person, which is also reflected in this guide. Finally, PCAR acknowledges that individuals should ultimately choose the language that is used to describe their experiences and therefore supports advocacy approaches that are person-centered and that use the terminology preferred by individuals they serve.

CONTRIBUTIONS

The National Sexual Violence Resource Center (NSVRC) would like to thank Sarah Dawgert for contributing to the content of this resource. Sarah Dawgert, MSW, is a consultant to organizations working to empower communities and increase awareness of issues surrounding women’s health and wellness. Sarah has worked in the anti-poverty and anti-sexual violence movements since 1996. Prior to launching her current consulting firm, Sarah managed the education and volunteer programs at the Boston Area Rape Crisis Center. She also spent several years working with homeless and low-income women and families in San Francisco’s Tenderloin neighborhood. Sarah has trained and coordinated community educators, developed and implemented needs/strengths assessments for service organizations, and facilitated state certification trainings for rape crisis counselors. She has trained on a range of issues related to sexual violence, has spoken at national and local conferences, and has been cited and published in dozens of regional and national media outlets. Sarah has a Bachelor’s Degree in Human Development from Boston College and a Masters of Social Work from Boston University.

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