Bisexuality Basics

What is Bisexuality?

Bisexuality is the potential to feel sexually attracted to and to engage in sensual or sexual relationships with people of either sex. A bisexual person may not be equally attracted to both sexes, and the degree of attraction may vary over time.

Self-perception is the key to a bisexual identity. Many people engage in sexual activity with people of both sexes, yet do not identify as bisexual. Likewise, other people engage in sexual relations only with people of one sex, or do not engage in sexual activity at all, yet identify as bisexual. There is no behavioral “test” to determine whether or not one is bisexual.

Bisexual Identity

Some people believe that a person is born heterosexual, homosexual, or bisexual (for instance, due to prenatal hormonal influences), and that their identity is inherent and unchangeable. Others believe that sexual orientation is due to socialization (for example, either imitating or rejecting parental models), or conscious choice (for example, choosing lesbianism as part of a political feminist identity). Others believe that it is a combination of these factors. Because biological, social, and cultural factors are different for each person, everyone’s sexuality is highly individual.

The “value” placed on a sexual identity should not depend on its origin. Many people assume that bisexuality is just a phase people go through. In actuality, any sexual orientation can be a phase. Humans are diverse, and a person’s individual sexual feelings and behavior change over time. The creation and consolidation of a sexual identity is an ongoing process. Since we are generally socialized as heterosexuals, bisexuality is a stage that many people experience as part of the process of acknowledging their homosexuality. Many others come to identify as bisexuals after a considerable period of identification as gay men or lesbians.

A recent study by Ron Fox of more than 900 bisexual individuals found that 1/3 had previously identified as lesbian or gay. An orientation that may not be permanent is still valid for the period of time it is experienced. Bisexuality, like homosexuality and heterosexuality, may be either a transitional step in the process of sexual discovery, or a stable, long-term identity.
**How Common is Bisexuality?**

It’s not easy to say how common bisexuality is, since little research has been done on this subject; most studies on sexuality have focused on heterosexuals or homosexuals. Based on research done by Alfred Kinsey in the 1940s and 1950s, as many as 15 to 25 percent of women and 33 to 46 percent of men may be bisexual, based on their activities or attractions. Bisexuals are in many ways a hidden population. In our culture, it is generally assumed that a person is either heterosexual (the default assumption) or homosexual (based on appearance or behavioral clues). Because bisexuality does not fit into these standard categories, it is often denied or ignored.

When it is recognized, bisexuality is often viewed as being “part heterosexual and part homosexual,” rather than being its own unique identity. Bisexuality threatens the accepted way of looking at the world by calling into question the validity of rigid sexual categories, and encourages acknowledgement of the existence of a diverse range of sexuality. Since there is no stereotypical bisexual appearance or form of behavior, bisexuals are usually assumed to be either heterosexual or homosexual. In order to increase awareness, bisexuals have begun to create their own visible communities.

**Bisexual Relationships**

Bisexuals, like all people, have a wide variety of relationship styles. Contrary to common myth, a bisexual person does not need to be sexually involved with both a man and a woman simultaneously. In fact, some people who identify as bisexual never engage in sexual activity with one or the other (or either) sex. As is the case for heterosexuals and gay men and lesbians, attraction does not involve acting on every desire. Like heterosexuals and gay people, many bisexuals choose to be sexually active with one partner only, and have long-term, monogamous relationships. Other bisexuals may have open marriages that allow for relationships with same-sex partners, three-way relationships, or a number of partners of the same or other gender (singly or simultaneously). It is important to have the freedom to choose the type of sexual and loving relationships that are right for the people involved, whatever their orientation.

“*What is this word, “bisexual,” and how come it’s not spelled with a hyphen? Should I be gay and then be straight, or vice versa? How long do I get to make up my mind?”*  
-Faith Cheltenham, President of BiNet USA, for HuffPost Gay Voices

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**The Bisexual Pride Flag**

*The deep pink stripe at the top represents the possibility of same-sex attraction and the royal blue stripe at the bottom represents the possibility of opposite sex attraction. The two overlap and create a lavender stripe at the center to symbolize the possibility of attraction anywhere along the gender spectrum.*
Biphobia

Bisexual women and men cannot be defined by their partner or potential partner, so they are rendered invisible within the heterosexist framework. This invisibility (biphobia) is one of the most challenging aspects of a bisexual identity. Living in a society that is based and thrives on opposition, on the reassurances and “balanced” polarities of dichotomy affects how we see the world, and how we negotiate our own, and other peoples’ lives to fit “reality”.

Most people are unaware of their homosexual or heterosexual assumptions until a bisexual speaks up and challenges those assumptions. Very often bisexuals are then dismissed and told they are “confused” and “simply have to make up their mind and choose.” For bisexually-identified people to maintain their integrity in a homo-hating heterosexist society they must have a strong sense of self, and the courage and conviction to live their lives in defiance of what passes for “normal.”

What Does Biphobia Look Like?

- Assuming that everyone you meet is either heterosexual or lesbian/gay.
- Assuming that bisexuals are confused or indecisive about their sexuality.
- Assuming that bisexuals are promiscuous or cannot live monogamously.
- Assuming that bisexuals are attracted to everyone.
- Assuming that people who identify as bisexual are “really” gay or lesbian, but are in denial.
- Assuming that bisexuals, if given the choice, would prefer to be with someone of the opposite sex in order to gain the privilege of being perceived as heterosexual.
- Believing that people who are bisexual spread HIV.
- Thinking that people identify as bisexual because it’s “trendy”.
- Assuming that bisexual means “available.”
- Not wanting to date someone who is bisexual because you assume that the person will eventually leave you for someone of another sex.
- Thinking that bisexuality is a combination of homosexuality and heterosexuality (e.g. 50/50, 30/70). Bisexuality is its own unique identity and people who identify as bisexual are not half-formed or half-committed.

Web Resources:

- The Bisexual Index: www.bisexualindex.org.uk
- BiNetUSA: www.binetusa.org
- Los Angeles Bi Task Force: labicenter.org
- American Institute of Bisexuality: www.bisexual.org

Source: UCR LGBTRC’s modification of flyer in Bisexual Resource Center web site at http://www.biresource.org; Resource update by CSUN Pride Center 8/5/2013