

## WORKING WITH BISEXUALITY

- Be aware of the impact of language. For example, using gay, or gay and lesbian as a shorthand for all LGBT people's sexualities reinforces invisibility and exclusion. If your service gathers information about sexuality, include bisexuality in the language used on official documentation such as intake forms and pro formas.
- Workplaces and other organisations can become more inclusive by increasing their cultural competency. Organisations should not assume that the creation of inclusive workplace environment for gay and lesbian employees automatically amounts to inclusion for bisexual people.
- Remember that for many people, disclosing bisexuality is not an easy or straightforward process. It may require you to express your openness to discussing sexuality and your awareness of the vast array of identities and possibilities of behaviours.
- Working with respect for individuality and self-determination is an important way to engage with bisexual people, rather than making assumptions about their relationships and integrity.
- It is important to give people the space to disclose their sexuality (if they wish to) as relationships that look one way may not be reflective of a person's sexuality. Creating spaces where these aspects can be explored is vital.

# BISEXUALITY

## A QLIFE GUIDE FOR HEALTH PROFESSIONALS

Bisexual people are attracted to people of multiple genders and these attractions may be fluid over time.



### CONTACT QLIFE

Health Professionals wanting to know more can contact us at [ask@qlife.org.au](mailto:ask@qlife.org.au)

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VERSION 1.0 AUGUST 2016

# BISEXUALITY

## BISEXUALITY CAN BE ABOUT EITHER IDENTITY OR BEHAVIOUR... OR BOTH

It is very difficult to know how many people in Australia can be considered bisexual as often the sexual behaviour of individuals does not require identity labels like 'straight', 'gay', or 'bisexual'. Recent estimates suggest that somewhere between 1 and 2% of Australians identify primarily as bisexual. However, when people are asked about attraction rather than how they identify, the number of people who experience bisexual feelings is typically between 6% and 13%.

Not every bisexual person's experience is the same. Bisexuality can manifest in a range of behaviours and relationship types. People who are attracted to people of more than one gender can also identify in a variety of ways. Some bisexual people may choose not to describe themselves as bisexual in gay, lesbian or largely heterosexual settings, sometimes preferring the term 'queer'. Some people who are bisexual prefer to identify as heterosexual, gay or lesbian, even though they internally identify as bisexual. Some people prefer no label.

People who are bisexual often experience a double burden of discrimination, both from society at large and in gay and lesbian environments. For this reason and others, some people choose to keep their bisexuality private for fear of intrusive questions or active discrimination.

## BISEXUALITY IS NOT A STATE OF CONFUSION

Many bisexual people experience a lack of validation of their relationships, attractions and identities. The growing visibility of lesbian and gay people has possibly contributed to a widespread perception that

people who say or think they are bisexual are really gay men or lesbian women who haven't managed to come out yet. That view is based on a number of inaccurate, stereotyped or rigid ideas, including a binary view of sexuality that most people are attracted only to men or to women.

Many people feel attraction towards a range of types of people and that this can change and vary across life. This is not the same as sexuality confusion.

## COMING OUT

Coming out can be particularly problematic for bisexual people who are often treated as if they have one foot in and one foot out of the closet. They might be criticised for a perceived inability to make up their mind.

Bisexual people often go through a time in which they question their own attractions and decide they may be more attracted to women, men or people with other gender identities. Unlike lesbian and gay people, who can easily locate a widely recognised process of coming out, many bisexual people feel that they need to personally invent their own identity. This is due in part to pervasive stereotypes and a lack of visible bisexual role models. Even when a person is comfortable with their self-identification as bisexual, many bisexual people have to engage in a long and ongoing process of publically maintaining this identity, often explaining it repeatedly to the same individuals.

## NEGATIVE ATTITUDES

Research on attitudes towards bisexuality has shown that bisexual individuals are often confronted with a range of particular negative attitudes. The view that bisexuality is a

transitional stage on the way to a full coming out as lesbian or gay stigmatises bisexual people as inauthentic or confused. Bisexuality is sometimes regarded as an invalid choice and thus bisexual women and men are often stereotyped as untrustworthy. Their potential interest in sexual experiences with people of different genders means they can be unfairly stereotyped.

The lived experience of bisexual people challenges these discriminatory ideas. Increasingly, people who are bisexual are finding ways of coming out that validates their identity as bisexual and increases an awareness that being bisexual, like being heterosexual, gay or lesbian, is a distinct and stable identity for some people or a fluid and flexible one for others.

## BISEXUALITY AND INVISIBILITY

Bisexual people are often socially invisible. Often bisexual people will not use language or display behaviours that indicate their bisexuality in a visible way. Most often it is assumed that a person has a fixed sexuality or attraction to one binary gender. For example, if a man and a woman have a relationship, people assume a constant heterosexual identity. This is not necessarily the case, as one or both of the people may be bisexual. Regardless of their public identity people may be attracted to more than one gender.

Invisibility or active erasure (being deliberately ignored) has a great impact on the health of bisexual people. Research has consistently shown that mental health for bisexual people is poorer than for heterosexual, gay or lesbian people. Bisexual people report heightened feelings of isolation, anxiety, distress and self-doubt. Often people who are bisexual feel pressure to choose either gay or straight identities and thus suppress what they experience as their sexuality.

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Feelings of stigma and experiences of discrimination are common for bisexual people which often results in people being less open about their identity, even when

compared to gay men or lesbians. Bisexual people are in a high risk category of people within the LGBTI (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex) population for suicidal ideas and actions, due primarily to stigma rather than bisexuality itself resulting in poorer mental health outcomes.

## CREATING AN INCLUSIVE SPACE FOR BISEXUAL PEOPLE

Service providers and organisations are often unaware they have bisexual clients and thus do not provide inclusive services. Often bisexual people have to choose between services designed for heterosexual, or for gay and/or lesbian people. Many service providers, including specialised sexual health services and those with specialist skills in working with gay and lesbian people, do not have any knowledge of bisexual people's health needs. Large numbers of bisexual people and particularly bisexual men report having to hide their sexual orientation from service providers on a regular basis.

Health providers need to provide an inclusive environment and avoid making assumptions about whether coming out as bisexual is desirable or beneficial for their clients.



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