

WHAT DOES MULTI-GENDER ATTRACTION MEAN?

Multi-gender attraction is “the potential to be attracted – romantically and/or sexually – to people of more than one gender, not necessarily at the same time, not necessarily in the same way, and not necessarily to the same degree”. There are many different sexualities that come under the umbrella of multi-gender attraction, including bisexuality (some use the term bi+ to refer to multiple multi-gender attracted sexualities), pansexuality, polysexuality, omnisexuality, multisexuality and others. Some multi-gender attracted people prefer to describe themselves as queer, flexible, fluid and/or non-monosexual (monosexuality refers to romantic and/or sexual attraction to one sex or gender only). Multi-gender attraction can change over time for some people or remain fixed for others.

STIGMA AND NEGATIVE ATTITUDES TOWARDS MULTI-GENDER ATTRACTION

Multi-gender attracted individuals are often confronted with a range of negative and stigmatising attitudes. The view that bisexuality is a transitional stage on the way to a full coming out as lesbian or gay stigmatises multi-gender attracted people as inauthentic or confused. Bisexuality is sometimes regarded as an invalid choice and thus multi-gender attracted individuals are often stereotyped as untrustworthy. Their potential interest in sexual experiences with people of different genders and sexes 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/or another multi-gender attracted sexuality. There is increasing awareness that being multi-gender attracted, like being heterosexual, gay or lesbian, is a distinct and stable identity for some people or a fluid and flexible one for others.

HOW MANY AUSTRALIANS ARE MULTI-GENDER ATTRACTED?

The Second Australian Study of Health and Relationships found that 3.8% of women and 3.2% of men identified as homosexual or bisexual. This number increased to 19.2% of women and 8.9% of men when the participants were asked about same-sex attraction or experiences, suggesting that for some people, multi-gender attraction is more about their feelings or experiences than identity labels.

Within the LGBTIQ+ community, a survey of 6,835 LGBTIQ participants in Australia aged 18 and over reported that 28.7% identified as gay, 20.5% identified as lesbian, 20.4% identified as bisexual, 12.2% as queer, 7.4% as pansexual, 3.2% as asexual and 7.7% as ‘something else’.

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Multi-gender attraction is increasingly reported in younger Australians. The 2018 National Secondary Students and Sexual Health survey reported that of school students in Years 10-12, 11% of male participants and 20% of female participants were bisexual, while Writing Themselves in 4, in a survey of 6,418 LGBTQA+ participants in Australia aged 14 to 21, reported that 33.8% identified as bisexual, 16.6% as gay, 12% as lesbian, 11.2% as pansexual, 8.4% as queer, 4.6% as asexual and 13.4% as ‘something else’. 50.6% were cisgender women, 22.3% were cisgender men, 1.2% were trans women, 6.5% were trans men and 19.5% were non-binary.

¹Ochs, R., & Rowley, S.E. (Eds.) (2005). Getting bi: Voices of bisexuals around the world. Bisexual Resource Center.

²Richters, J., Altman, D., Badcock, P.B., Smith, A.M.A., Visser, R.O. de, Grulich A.E., et al. (2014). Sexual identity, sexual attraction and sexual experience: The second Australian study of health and relationships. *Sexual Health*, 11(5), 451-60.

³Hill, A. O., Bourne, A., McNair, R., Carman, M., & Lyons, A. (2020). Private Lives 3: The health and wellbeing of LGBTIQ people in Australia. ARCSHS monograph series number 122. Australian Research Centre in Sex, Health and Society, La Trobe University.

⁴Fisher, C., Waling, A., Kerr, L., Bellamy, R., Ezer, P., Mikolajczak, M., et al. 6th National Survey of Australian Secondary Students and Sexual Health 2018. Australian Research Centre in Sex, Health and Society, La Trobe University; 2019.

⁵Hill, A. O., Lyons, A., Jones, J., McGowan, I., Carman, M., Parsons, M., Power, J., & Bourne, A. (2021). Writing themselves in 4: The health and wellbeing of LGBTQA+ young people in Australia. National report, monograph series number 124. Australian Research Centre in Sex, Health, and Society, La Trobe University.

⁶<https://web.archive.org/web/20120204070907/http://www.biflag.com/Activism.asp>

⁷https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pansexual_flag#/media/File:Pansexuality_Pride_Flag.svg

⁸https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Polysexuality_Pride_Flag.svg

⁹https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Omnisexuality_flag.svg

¹⁰https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Multisexuality_flag.svg

¹¹Ross, L. E., Salway, T., Tarasoff, L. A., MacKay, J. M., Hawkins, B. W., & Fehr, C. P. (2018). Prevalence of depression and anxiety among bisexual people compared to gay, lesbian, and heterosexual individuals: A systematic review and meta-analysis. *Journal of Sex Research*, 55(4-5), 435-456. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00224499.2017.1387755>

¹²Taylor, J., Power, J., Smith, E., & Rathbone, M. (2019). Bisexual mental health: Findings from the ‘Who I Am’ study. *Australian Journal of General Practice*, 48(3), 138-144.

¹³Hill, A. O., Bourne, A., McNair, R., Carman, M., & Lyons, A. (2020). Private Lives 3: The health and wellbeing of LGBTIQ people in Australia. ARCSHS monograph series number 122. Australian Research Centre in Sex, Health and Society, La Trobe University.

¹⁴Waling, A., Lim, G., Dhalla, S., Lyons, A., & Bourne, A. (2019). Understanding LGBTIQ+ lives in crisis. Australian Research Centre in Sex, Health and Society, La Trobe University.

¹⁵Hill, A. O., Bourne, A., McNair, R., Carman, M., & Lyons, A. (2020). Private Lives 3: The health and wellbeing of LGBTIQ people in Australia. ARCSHS monograph series number 122. Australian Research Centre in Sex, Health and Society, La Trobe University.

MULTI-GENDER ATTRACTION QGUIDE

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MULTI-GENDER ATTRACTION QGUIDE

WHAT DO THE DIFFERENT LABELS MEAN?

Bisexuality and the bi+ umbrella



Bisexual pride flag ^{vi}

You might sometimes hear the term “the bisexual umbrella”, which is used to describe a range of multi-gender attracted, non-monosexual identities and behaviours. It can include people who define their sexualities and identities using terms like bi-curious, fluid, homoflexible and heteroflexible.

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 or another multi-gender attracted sexuality. 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.

Pansexuality



Pansexuality pride flag ^{vii}

Some define pansexuality as attraction towards someone regardless of their sex or gender identity.

People often ask what the difference is between bisexuality and pansexuality. One response is that bisexuality refers to being attracted to more than one gender, while pansexuality refers to being attracted to all genders, or not being limited to people of one sex or gender.

Polysexuality



Polysexuality pride flag ^{viii}

Polysex individuals are sexually and/or romantically attracted to people of multiple genders. They may prefer polysexual as a term over other identities under the bisexual+ umbrella as they believe it suggests more a wider range of genders beyond the male/female binary (“poly” means many”).

Omnisexuality



Omnisexuality pride flag ^{ix}

Omnisexual people are romantically, sexually and/or emotionally attracted to people of all genders and sexual orientations, and emphasise that gender plays a contributing factor in their attraction (rather than being attracted to people regardless of their gender identity).

Multisexuality



Multisexuality pride flag ^x

Multisexuality refers to romantic and/or sexual attraction to more than one sex or gender. Some people refer to multisexuality as a spectrum or an umbrella term like the bisexual+ umbrella.

HEALTH AND WELLBEING OF MULTI-GENDER ATTRACTED PEOPLE

Bi+ people tend to have poorer mental health, and higher rates of anxiety and depression, than heterosexual and gay/lesbian individuals^{xi}. A 2019 Australian study^{xii} found that having high levels of internalised biphobia, being in a heterosexual relationship and having a less supportive partner significantly predicted higher psychological distress.

Campaigns promoting healthy relationships and supporting those in unhealthy relationships are being promoted in LGBTIQ+ communities. Primary prevention campaigns are being developed to raise awareness of intimate partner violence in LGBTIQ+ relationships and to challenge the drivers of violence. Of bisexual participants^{xiii} aged 18 and over, 41.7% reported having ever been verbally abused by an intimate partner, while 28.7% reported having ever been sexually abused by an intimate partner and 22.5% reported having ever been physically abused by an intimate partner.

WORKING WITH MULTI-GENDER ATTRACTED PEOPLE

A 2019 study^{xiv} found that over 71% of LGBTI+ participants chose not to contact a crisis support service during their most recent personal or mental health crises, partly due to anticipation of discrimination and lack of awareness of LGBTI+ specialist counselling.

Mainstream preventive health interventions need to be inclusive of LGBTIQ+ people in mental health services and in physical screening and tests. For multi-gender attracted people, this may require the following:

- An awareness of language use and the potential impacts of using incorrect language and terminology. For example, using gay, or gay and lesbian, to refer to all LGB people's sexualities reinforces invisibility and exclusion. If your service gathers information about sexuality, include bisexuality and pansexuality in the language used on official documentation such as intake forms and pro formas. If asking about partners, you can use they/them pronouns (e.g. “What is their name?”)
- If you make a mistake and use incorrect language, apologise but don't ask for an education from the individual. Educate yourself further afterwards.

- 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+ and multi-gender attracted people.
- Don't make assumptions about people's sexuality based on the gender or sex of their partner/s, as this contributes to biserasure and exclusion. Many multi-gender individuals may be in relationships that appear heterosexual, so be cautious about making assumptions in the language you use and err on the side of inclusive.
- 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. However, remember that for many people, disclosing multi-gender attraction 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. Just because you provide a space for someone to ‘come out’ does not mean they will.
- Working with respect for individuality, inclusion and self-determination is an important way to engage with multi-gender attracted people, rather than making assumptions about relationships and identities.

ALLIES (INCLUDING GAY AND LESBIAN PEOPLE)

Recent research into LGBTIQ+ communities suggests that community connection can protect against the effects of discrimination, stigma and rejection. You can be an active ally towards multi-gender attracted people by being inclusive, and correcting incorrect or exclusionary language from others, and by not making assumptions based on people's partner/s or presentation.

Lesbian and gay participants^{xv} aged 18 and over were more likely to report feeling accepted ‘a lot’ or ‘always’ at work and with family members than bisexual, pansexual and asexual participants. Have a think about your workplace, family or friendship group, and see if you can identify ways of making certain settings and events more inclusive for multi-gender attracted people.

SUPPORT, REFERRALS AND HEALTH SERVICES FOR MULTI-GENDER ATTRACTED PEOPLE

Bi Alliance: <http://www.bi-alliance.org/>

Melbourne Bisexual Network: <https://www.melbournebisexualnetwork.com/>

Bisexual Resource Center: <https://biresource.org/>

QLife (Australia-wide anonymous and free LGBTI peer support and referral): <https://qlife.org.au>

Switchboard (connecting the Victorian LGBTIQ+ community to the services needed): <https://www.switchboard.org.au>, <https://www.switchboard.org.au/rainbow-door>

ACON (initially formed to respond to the HIV/AIDS epidemic in NSW, ACON remain committed to ending HIV for everyone in the community, and now work with a diverse range of people to ensure their voice and health needs are represented): <https://www.acon.org.au/what-we-are-here-for>

Thorne Harbour Health (initially formed as the Victorian AIDS Action Committee and later the Victorian Aids Council, THH serve the health needs of LGBTI communities to ensure gender, sex, and sexually diverse individuals are treated with dignity and can participate fully in society): <https://thorneharbour.org/lgbti-health>

Living Proud (WA's main LGBTIQ+ service, including a peer counselling phone line and community capacity building): <https://www.livingproud.org.au>

queerspace/Drummond St (VIC-based LGBTIQ+ health and wellbeing support service with a focus on relationships, families, parenting and young people): <https://www.queerspace.org.au/our-services>

Rainbow Health Victoria (a program that supports LGBTIQ health and wellbeing): <https://www.rainbowhealthvic.org.au>

Trans Hub (digital information and resource platform for all trans and gender-diverse people in NSW, allies and health providers): <https://www.transhub.org.au>

DocList (Australia-wide list of doctors and mental health professionals recommended by lesbian and bisexual women in Australia): <https://www.doclist.com.au>

Say It Out Loud (Australia-wide service for those who have experienced sexual, domestic and/or family violence): <https://sayitoutloud.org.au/>

With Respect (family violence and intimate partner violence service supporting LGBTIQ+ communities and their families): <https://www.withrespect.org.au/community/resources/item/8-being-bi-or-multi-gender-attracted>

SUPPORT FOR YOUNG MULTI-GENDER ATTRACTED PEOPLE

Minus 18 (Australia-wide services for LGBTQIA+ youth, including life-affirming social inclusion, empowerment and advocacy): <https://www.minus18.org.au>

Twenty10, incorporating the gay & lesbian counselling service of NSW (providing specialised services for young people aged 12-25, including housing, mental health, counselling and support): <https://www.twenty10.org.au>



LIFE