

LINE ON LIFE

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Myths about Homosexuality *

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When any group is perceived as an outgroup, stereotypes and myths develop about that group. Myths (1) cause anxiety for those who think the myths are true and (2) lead to falsely labeling others as outgroup members. Like myths about any outgroup, myths about homosexuals are not true, or they only apply to a small segment of homosexuals.

Myth. You can always tell homosexuals by the way they look or act. Men who act in a feminine manner must be gay. Masculine women with short haircuts and deeper voices must be lesbians.

Facts. These **stereotypes** only apply to about 15% of male homosexuals and 5% of lesbians. These stereotypes confuse the concept of sexual orientation (whether you prefer the same or other sex as sexual partners) with gender roles (exhibiting masculine or feminine behavior). Just as the vast majority of gays and lesbians do not fit these stereotypes, a portion of heterosexuals match them. Except for their actual sexual activity or admitting their sexual preferences, there is no accurate way to judge someone's sexual orientation.

Many adolescents and some adults are not secure in their masculinity or femininity. For them, it is important to be as different from a homosexual person as possible. They may even have **homophobia** — an unreasonable fear and/or hatred of homosexuals. With their insecurity, they maintain stereotypes of effeminate male homosexuals and masculine lesbians. When they follow the stereotyped gender roles, they feel more sexually adjusted. They use the stereotypes to distinguish between outgroup and ingroup members. When these individuals meet homosexuals who do not fit the homosexual stereotypes, they feel very upset and threatened. They are extremely upset by any activity with people of the same sex that even hints at being sexual.

Myth. Homosexuals never marry. Therefore, people who never marry are homosexual. Likewise, people who marry and have children can be presumed to be heterosexual.

Facts. Many homosexual people do marry and have children. Likewise, many people who never marry are strictly heterosexual. About one in five gay men and one in three lesbians enter into a heterosexual marriage at some time in their lives.

Myth. Homosexuals are all undersexed; homosexuals are all oversexed. (It's heard both ways.)

Facts. Whether people are heterosexual or homosexual, they exhibit a great range of sexual desire and activity. Before the advent of AIDS, there was a small segment of homosexual males who were extremely active — exceeding the capacities of almost all straight men. However, they are the exception rather than the rule. Outside of this small group, homosexuals and heterosexuals are similar in their levels of sexual activity.

Myth. Recently the number of homosexuals has increased tremendously.

Facts. From Alfred Kinsey's studies (1948, 1953) to others in the 1980s, the incidence of homosexuality has remained fairly constant. However, homosexuals are more visible now. With the gay liberation movement, more homosexuals stopped keeping their preferences secret. Many more have "*come out of the closet.*"

Myth. Homosexuals are constantly trying to convert straight people to homosexuality.

Facts. Just as a few heterosexuals try to seduce homosexuals, a few homosexuals may try to seduce straights. However, the great majority of homosexuals do not attempt such seduction. Homosexuals are not likely to "*make a play*" for someone who does not seem attracted to them. As with most of us, at times homosexuals may confuse friendship with sexual attraction. They may act on their erroneous assumption. Unfortunately, this seems to greatly bother those who believe the first myth we mentioned. They may wonder, "*Why did they think I might be homosexual?*" Any efforts to convert straights to homosexuality — or vice versa — are very unlikely to succeed.

Myth. If you are not heterosexual, you are homosexual.

Facts. Kinsey's studies found that many people have both heterosexual and homosexual feelings. Rather than viewing people as either heterosexual or homosexual, he saw sexual orientation on a continuum. In a 1978 study, psychologists Bell and Weinberg found that 25% of gay men considered themselves *ambisexual* — both homosexual and heterosexual — in behavior, but 58% indicated they were ambisexual in terms of their feelings. In contrast, lesbians are more ambisexual in both feelings and behavior than gay men.

Especially in preadolescence, there is a normal — and typically temporary — inclination toward same-sex relationships before heterosexual attractions develop. Kinsey found that 50% of men and 28% of women

had same-sex sexual experiences. Almost all of these people developed a heterosexual orientation.

Myth. Homosexuals are more likely to molest children.

Facts. Homophobic people are unnecessarily concerned about homosexuals molesting young children. One often-stated argument is, "Would you like your son taught in school by a homosexual man?" My answer is, "As much as I would want my daughter taught in school by a heterosexual man." The question assumes that homosexuals are more likely to molest children. However, 97% of the child sexual abuse is done by heterosexuals. Even if corrected for the proportion of homosexuals in the population, homosexuals are not more likely to sexually molest children.

With most outgroups, one trait is blown out of proportion, so we forget that they are basically human beings like us.

Debunking these myths may help you understand that — except for their sexual preferences — homosexuals are like other people. They deserve the same respect that you would give any other person.

* Adapted from Curtis Byer and Louis Shainberg's *Dimensions of Human Sexuality*, Brown & Benchmark, 1994, page 386.