Sexuality

In its broadest sense sexuality describe the whole way a person goes about expressing themselves as a sexual being. It describes how important sexual expression is in a person's life; how they choose to express that sexuality and any preference they may have towards the type of sexual partner they choose. Every survey of human sexual behaviour reveals that there is a huge variety of sexual expression - the way we choose to behave sexually is usually as individual and as complicated as the ways we choose to dress or to earn a living. Human sexuality rarely falls into neat categories or lends itself to simple labelling. Human sexuality is a rich and complex area of human experience. Authors, artists, poets, philosophers and composers have worked to explore sexuality from earliest times without coming up with any enduring answers.

In recent times however, the word sexuality has come to also have a more limited meaning. Sexuality is now often defined by whether the gender of the sexual partners we choose is the same as our own or different. Some feel this more restrictive definition can create problems since it attempts to fit a complex, subtle experience into three or four simple categories. However it also offers solutions since it can give people who do not feel they share the major assumptions of the dominant heterosexual mainstream the voice, pride and sense of validation that comes from discovering an identity and a shared experience with others.

A hot debate has endured over recent years about why people's sexuality differs. Many theories have been put forward - citing genetic pre-determination, childhood influences and peer-pressure amongst other reasons. However, attempts to find a single cause for individual's choices of sexual orientation have not been successful. Nor have attempts to influence or change individual's sexuality. Like many of our other characteristics, sexuality seems to be largely a chance product of our individual nature which is then further developed by our early interactions. Like many other personality traits, our sexuality seems to be formed by the time we reach teenage -- although it may be many years later before we each understand and accept our sexuality. Our sexuality seems resistant to attempts to radically change it.

On the rest of this page, we look at sexuality predominantly in terms of the choices which face those who feel convinced they are gay, lesbian or bisexual. However, this is not the only way of viewing your sexuality, so don't feel obliged to categorise yourself this way if it does not feel right to you! Those who are interested in more information about human sexuality and about general books on the subject may find the Sexual Problems section of our Relationship Page helpful.

Coming Out to Yourself

Before you can come out to anyone else, you have to come out to yourself. There is no hard and fast rule when this happens. Some people are certain of their sexuality from a very young age; for others it can happen much later in life. Accepting the conclusion that one is gay, lesbian or bisexual hopefully is easier nowadays than it has been in the past. Attitudes are somewhat more accepting and there are now more people living openly gay and lesbian lives than there has been in the recent past. Royal Holloway in particular seeks to offer a supportive environment to students of all sexual orientation, and the Student Union is active in offering support to gay, lesbian or bisexual students and in challenging homophobic (anti-gay and lesbian) attitudes. However the decision to come out to yourself can still be a very scary one and can be a period of upheaval and uncertainty. If you want someone to talk to during this time, the
Student Counselling Service will be happy to help you as will the Student Union. There is also the Gay and Lesbian switchboard. Contacts below.

**Coming Out to Others**

Families often have detailed plans for their children and can be very upset when it becomes clear that not all their hopes are going to be realised. Similarly friends and other groups may have their own very definite opinions or prejudices. It is important that you come out to people who will validate and celebrate your new found sexuality as well as to people who may question it. You may also want to talk over the situation in detail first - see below.

- Look for sympathetic people to come out to first.
- Follow your own timetable - it's your life and your sexuality.
- Don't feel you have to tell people until you are ready.
- Don't assume people are homophobic just because they make anti-gay jokes. Often people haven't really thought the thing through, and don't do so until someone close to them comes out.
- Sadly the opposite can also be true. Just because people claim to be politically correct doesn't mean that they cannot be quite fixed and judgemental in their view of gays and lesbians.
- Everyone doesn't have to know. Many people -- such as Department Staff -- will consider your sexuality is your own business. You don't have to share it with them unless you particularly want to.
- Don't be too put off by an initial bad reaction. Many people react badly when they are faced with something that has shocked them. However, what is said can always be unsaid -- even if it doesn't feel like it at the time.
- Choose your medium. If you are worried that someone will be very hostile, writing might give them time to assimilate the news better.
- Never feel guilty! Easier said than done, but once we start blaming ourselves for other's bad reactions to us we are on the road to depression. None of us has control over how we are so we don't need to apologise for it.
- Get a copy of "Coming Out and Staying Out" from the Student Union. Although directed at gay and bisexual men, many women have found it helpful.

**Sexual Health**

It is important that anyone who is sexually active takes care of their health. This applies particularly to gay men since in this country the HIV virus affects them more than other groups. We have reproduced the relevant pages of advice from the Student Union leaflets on this site. Our thanks to the Student Union. In particular remember that you do not need to go to your GP for advice if you are concerned about them knowing about your sexuality. Other local sources of help are listed on the page.

**Other Help**

The counselling service will be glad to offer support and counselling on any of the matters discussed above. The LGBT Society at Royal Holloway, University of London will offer advice and will allow you to mix with others - both gay and straight - for mutual support. Contact can be made through the Students' Union.
London Lesbian and Gay Switchboard is on 020 7837 7324. For further information visit their website at www.llgs.org.uk

National AIDS Helpline - 0800 137 437

Gay Youth UK - has a new informative site aiming to serve LGB youth at www.gayyouth.org.uk/