

# Sexual Identity

## A Guide for Sexual Minorities

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Dear Reader,

This pamphlet was designed to be an introductory resource for you—someone who experiences same-sex attraction and who may be struggling with questions about your sexual identity or with how to navigate difficult life circumstances that are borne out of your unique struggle.

The Institute for the Study of Sexual Identity (ISSI) is a scholarly institute committed to studying issues related to sexual identity and being a resource for the community concerning such issues. After being contacted frequently by individuals and professionals alike who are searching for resources, we thought it would be helpful to create a condensed resource that addressed some common struggles related to sexual identity for this life stage. In such a brief space, we cannot do justice to all topics that might be relevant to you; however, we have included several topics of interest that have emerged from our work with individuals in the past.

We recognize that this may be a difficult time for you, and by reading this booklet, we hope that you may gain some understanding and even some practical tools to assist you in your journey. We hope that you will find the information we provide to be helpful. We look forward to being a resource to you.

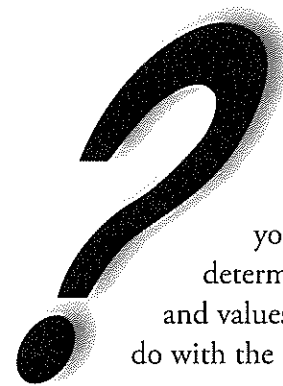
Best Regards,

ISSI

## Sexual Identity

### Description of Sexual Identity: What is it?

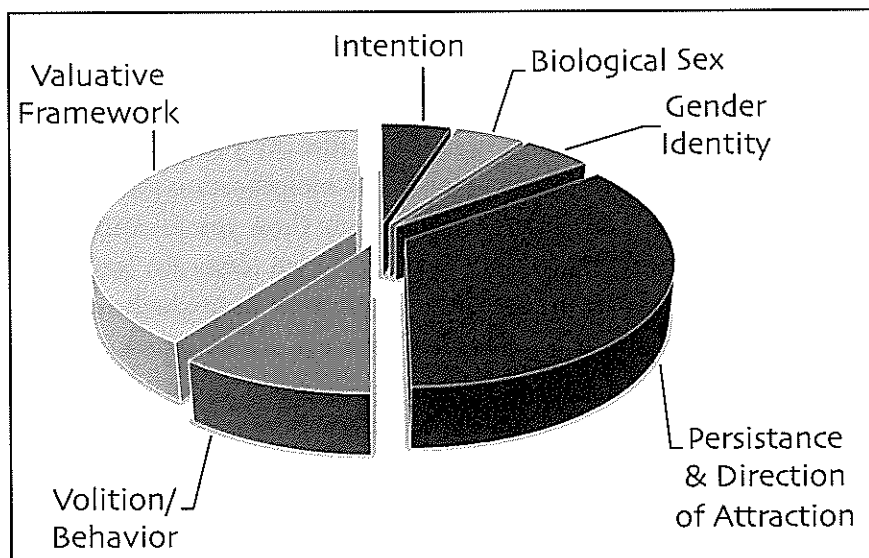
The term sexual identity refers to how you identify yourself, typically with respect to your sexual attractions. This identification can be public (how you identify to others) or private (how you identify to yourself). Some of the most common words used today are “gay,” “lesbian,” “bisexual,” or “straight,” although some individuals use the term “queer” or prefer no label at all. While the definition we have given you may seem simple, we view sexual identity as fairly complex. We believe that what contributes to a person adopting one identity



label over another is multifaceted, and that these facets play out differently for different people. Some of these factors are: biological sex (male or female), gender identity (how masculine or feminine you feel), sexual attractions (towards the same or opposite sex or both), intentions (how you intend or desire to act, the kind of person you are determined to become), valuative framework (your beliefs and values about sexual behavior), and behavior (what you do with the intentions and attractions you have).

Indeed, each of these aspects are often given different “weights” by different people in terms of the extent to which they inform or shape their sexual identity. See the example below, in which the individual illustrates that his sexual attractions and valuative framework (the values that one holds) heavily influence his sexual identity, while his behavior is not of great significance. Another individual, however, may display a much different breakdown of her sexual identity.

### Weighted Aspects of Identity



As you can see, sexual identity can be complex—not to mention that it contributes to numerous other intricate parts of you to create your entire personal identity.

### Background to Sexual Orientation, Identity

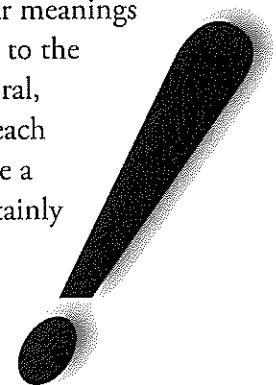
Many times when people discuss same-sex sexuality, they are curious about what causes a person to develop a homosexual orientation. Indeed, the “nature vs. nurture” debate regarding this issue has raged for years. Someone on the “nature” side of the debate would likely hold that biological factors or genes lead to the development of same-sex sexuality, while someone on the “nurture” side would believe that environmental factors were the major contributors. Others frame the debate in their mind as: “God made me this way” vs. “my parents did this to me” or “my experience of abuse caused my same-sex

attractions.” To our knowledge, no research exists that fully supports either biology or environment. All of the research completed to date on the topics of what causes homosexual and bisexual orientations is

**Neither biology nor environment alone causes someone to have a homosexual orientation!**

inconclusive. The studies have limitations in design and/or they have sampling problems. So in reality, we do not know exactly how people develop a specific sexual orientation.

What we do know from all the different studies conducted is that there seems to be many potential factors that contribute to sexual orientation, which can be different for each individual. In other words, there are multiple pathways to an endpoint. For some people it might be that they have a “push” from biology that, when combined with life circumstances, may contribute to experiences of same-sex attraction. No one experience likely causes them to experience same-sex attraction; however, various circumstances may contribute to them thinking of themselves as gay and they may integrate their feelings of same-sex attraction into a gay identity. Others may develop their sexual identity by a different set of circumstances. The point is that each person experiences unique circumstances in his or her life that hold particular meanings for the individual and may or may not contribute to the development of same-sex attractions. But, in general, the best of psychological science cannot help us reach firm conclusions regarding why you or others have a homosexual or bisexual orientation, so we are certainly not going to focus on trying to give you the final word. What we want you to know is that you are not to blame for your attractions.



Now that you know what sexual orientation and sexual identity are, let us tell you why we focus on sexual identity and not sexual orientation. Your sexual orientation refers to the consistent (regular) and persistent (continued over time) attractions you experience. At this point we have concluded there is not enough good research to support saying that most people can effectively change their orientation. The most optimistic research says there is about a 30% rate of success when people attempt to change; but, those positive results were not the same for everyone and may not have always been change of orientation. For instance, for some individuals in these studies, “success” meant abstaining from same-sex behavior. Furthermore, focusing on orientation can heighten expectations that it needs to change, or that a person’s worth or spiritual maturity is predicated on their experiencing attraction to the opposite sex. For these reasons, at our institute, we prefer to stay away from an “all or nothing” mindset on this issue—that either you experience change in your orientation or you identify as gay.

Instead, we emphasize sexual identity. We aim to help you sort through the concerns that you have and help you figure out what choices you want to make in living your life. We can help you pull all of the parts of your identity together in a way that makes sense to you and falls in line with your values and experiences. Formulating your sexual identity would take your sexual orientation into consideration along with many of the other factors we have

“ Deciding to choose a gay identity or not (and deciding what the word “gay” means to you) is what we desire to help you figure out. ”

discussed. Some people decide that since they have a homosexual orientation, they will take on a gay identity. They essentially integrate their feelings of attraction to the same sex into a gay identity. Others feel that even though they have these attractions and orientation there are other things in their lives that are more important to them and they decide not to take on a gay identity. Generally these things are their religious beliefs or values; but occasionally, there are other reasons. Deciding to choose a gay identity or not (and deciding what the word “gay” means to you) is what we desire to help you figure out.

### Clinical Description

As a result of our work with many people throughout the years, we recognize that each person has a unique life story that holds significant meaning for that individual. Therefore, we strive to be cautious in assuming that our research or findings apply to everyone. Yet, at the same time, many folks have found it helpful to know what other same-sex attracted individuals commonly experience.

One of the most common experiences reported during the teenage years is confusion surrounding one’s attractions. In addition, many individuals express distress and feelings of internal conflict because of religious or cultural beliefs or values. Some are disappointed that they cannot be heterosexually married, especially as their peers are reaching “typical” milestones of adulthood. Sometimes, these experiences lead negative emotional reactions that can be problematic. Even those same-sex attracted people who do not experience this confusion or internal conflict tend to be at a higher risk for experiencing depression, anxiety, and other negative emotions. Something to keep in mind is that some researchers assert that the higher rates

of negative emotional experiences like depression, anxiety, and suicidality are caused by society's disapproval of homosexuality and instances of discrimination and prejudice. They conclude that if same-sex sexuality was accepted, the rates of these emotional problems would be no different than those of the general population. Others point to similar research findings (of mental health and physical health disparities) in more gay-affirming societies, which suggest that more than just societal stigma may be a consideration.

At the same time, some people who incorporate their attractions into a gay identity report having good and healthy relationships, academic achievement, career success, and so on. So, choosing a public sexual identity has real consequences. For instance, choosing a gay identity may be a positive thing in that you will have access to some support that you might not otherwise have; however, public identification as gay may also put you at risk for discrimination. Refraining from choosing a gay identity may protect you from hurtful actions by others, but may also make you feel misunderstood by those who might not comprehend the meaning of other labels you may choose for yourself.

Other research that we find relevant involves studies on non-monogamy and relationship instability. Overall, research finds that individuals who identify as gay are less successful at maintaining long-term committed romantic relationship than others; this is especially the case for gay males. Some people argue these findings reflect a lack of social support (like gay marriages not being accepted in most places). Others talk about a real difference among individuals who identify as gay. Regardless of the reasons, these differences in rates of non-monogamy may be important to you.

In summary, researchers are finding trends in the ways that individuals who identify as gay experience their lives from an emotional and relational standpoint. Whatever the cause, it is likely that you, even if you have not chosen to identify as gay, are experiencing some negative feelings and may even be having difficulty in your interpersonal relationships. In light of this, we aim to provide you with information as you try to navigate your particular difficulties and try to make sense out of your life.

### Milestone Events

Milestone events are major events that, when you look back at your life, can be seen as markers or signposts in your life that carry meaning. In our research, we have found that individuals who experience same-sex attraction often experience similar milestones in the development of their sexual identity.

**Table 1. Average Age Range in Years at Time of Milestone Events\***

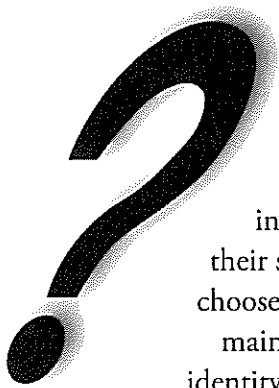
	Awareness	Labeling	Disclosure
Males	11.8	13.6	14.5
Females	13.0	14.4	14.6

**Note:** Awareness = first awareness of feelings of same-sex attraction; Labeling = first labeling of oneself as gay, lesbian, or bisexual; Disclosure = first disclosure to another person.

\* Study of 528 Male and Female Gay-Identified Youths by D'Augelli, A. R., Grossman, A. H., & Starks, M. T. (2008). Gender atypicality and sexual orientation development among lesbian, gay, and bisexual youth: Prevalence, Sex differences, and parental responses. *Journal of Gay & Lesbian Mental Health*, 12(1/2), 121-143.

The general consensus is that, in this process, individuals follow a similar progression: (1) awareness of feeling “different” than others, or of first experiences of same-sex attraction; (2) engagement in same-sex behavior; (3) labeling oneself as gay; (4) disclosure of a gay identity to others; and (5) entering into a relationship with another member of the same sex. Of course, you may not have experienced all of these milestones in the past, and you may not have experienced them in the same order. But it can be helpful to understand general markers that may carry meaning for you. Our table outlines the average ages at which an individual may work through some of the milestones of sexual identity development

Although the people in this study stated that they experienced same-sex attraction at a young age, most did not label themselves as gay, lesbian, or bisexual until years to come. We know from other studies of community samples that individuals often do not engage in same-sex sexual behavior or have a same-sex relationship until their mid-to late teenage years. Indeed, many people move through cycles of confusion, denial, minimization, frustration, and fear before even acknowledging their struggle to anyone else or settling on a sexual identity.



Although these are averages based on people in the general community, in our research, which is of Christians who often have conservative religious beliefs, we tend to find that these milestones look a bit different. Indeed, some individuals who may experience conflict between their sexual attractions and their beliefs and values may choose not to pursue or engage in same-sex behavior, maintain same-sex relationships, or take on a gay identity. In addition, for this population, most of these

Table 2. Average Age Range in Years at Time of Milestone Events

	Awareness	SSB	Attributions	Labeling	Relationship
Study 1 <sup>+</sup>	13.0	16.4	17.2	17.9	18.2
Study 2 <sup>**</sup>	13.3	16.3	16.3	17.0	15.9

**Note:** Awareness = first awareness of feelings of same-sex attraction (SSA); SSB = same-sex behavior; Attributions = meaning attributed to SSA; Labeling = first labeling of oneself as gay, lesbian, or bisexual; Disclosure = first disclosure to another person; Relationship = First relationship with the same sex. Many participants did not engage in SSB or label themselves as gay despite reported SSA. But for those who did, we report the average age of milestone events.

<sup>+</sup> Study of male and female Christian college students by Yarhouse, M. A., Stratton, S., Dean, J., & Brooke, H. L. (2009). Listening to sexual minorities on Christian campuses. *Journal of Psychology and Theology, 37*(2), 96-113.

<sup>\*\*</sup> Study of male and female Christian college students by Dean, J. B., Stratton, S. P., Yarhouse, M. A., & Lastoria, M. D. (2011). Same-sex attraction. In M. D. Lastoria (Ed.), *Sexuality, religiosity, behaviors, attitudes A look at religiosity, sexual attitudes, and sexual behaviors of Christian college students* (pp. 56-70). Houghton, NY: Association for Christians in Student Development.

sexual identity milestones occur later in terms of age. These two studies are of Christian college students who experience same-sex attraction. Note that their milestones are reported and likely reflect their sense of their sexual identity at the present time (as college students). You can also see that we ask sexual minorities about their attributions. What we are learning is that people make meaning out of their experience of same-sex attraction. Some people attribute their attractions to a gay identity that they just need to embrace or come to terms with. Other attribute their attractions to parent-child



relationships, unwanted sexual experiences, a result of original sin that affects all of life, including sexuality, and so on. The important point is that there is a time when people try to make sense of their attractions. The way that they make meaning tends to contribute to people adopting different sexual identity labels.

We also want to point out that these studies are of college-age students. There is a tendency to see all of the milestone events as completed by the time participants were in college. However, in a study of Christian sexual minorities from the community (ranging in age from 32-79 years), we found that while some milestones were similar, such as age of awareness of attraction, people did not report achieving a settled sexual identity until even later—past college age. Indeed, those Christian who embraced a gay identity did so at an average age of 26, while those Christians who did not identify as gay settled into that identity at an average age of 34. We see the length of time as indicative of the challenges they have faced in navigating both religious and sexual identities. Resolving tension between these identities takes time, and we encourage those we work with to not rush a this process.

### Counseling and Resources

As you have already likely been navigating this journey for several years, you probably appreciate the importance of having people around you to whom you can talk—people you can share your struggles with and people you can trust. While we may not be able to directly fill those roles in your life, we would like to provide you with a range of options that some people find helpful when they are seeking support.

### Counseling and Therapy: Assessment

Many people who are struggling with their experience of same-sex attractions find it helpful to talk to a professional. Therefore, in this section we hope to outline some of what you might expect from counseling or therapy, how your counselor might work with you, what topics you might discuss, and so forth.

**It is very important for you to have people around you to whom you can talk—people you can trust.**

If you were to see a mental health professional, you would probably go to the office for an initial interview before starting any kind of therapy. This process is called assessment. In this interview, you are asked a broad range of questions about numerous areas of your life. It is similar to a conversation with a medical doctor, who is doing a checkup, asking about all facets of how you function. The difference is that this interview looks at a number of factors that might figure into your concerns. This helps determine what the primary issue is and helps the counselor see the “big picture”—which may include any other issues in addition to what you think is the problem. Like we mentioned previously, these other problems are sometimes part of a person’s experience and can take the form of symptoms of depression and/or anxiety. A counselor is generally supportive and encouraging. He or she will talk about the things you want to discuss, but because issues you are dealing with are so controversial each counselor may respond differently—in ways that he or she think are in your best interest. Some may choose to focus more on your other concerns than on the fact that you distressed by experiences of same-sex attraction.

Here at ISSI, we would encourage a counselor to undertake the same general process described above. We believe this can assist you in creating a plan for counseling specifically suited to your needs. We encourage counselors to measure your quality of life so you can share your overall satisfaction with how things are going, as well as reflect on specific areas—this way we can get an idea about a range of issues in your life. We also encourage counselors to get more information on your sense of your own sexuality, as well as the messages you heard during your childhood, and those you hear from friends and the media about sexuality. Counselors should also ask you about the strength of your attraction toward the same and opposite sex.

These types of questions function as tools to help you and your counselor create a language for your unique struggles and experiences. At ISSI, we train counselors to avoid making judgments about what is normal and abnormal.

Instead, we aim to help you reflect on your experiences, beliefs, and values, and find the language to tell your story and would encourage other professionals to do the same. This will help you understand how language shapes your perspective and worldview. We would encourage a counselor to then help you sort out how you want to live based upon all of this—your attractions, your values, and all other parts of who you are.

“ The focus of sexual identity therapy is to help you figure out how to live your life in a way that is consistent with your beliefs and values. ”

### Counseling and Therapy: Diagnostic Issues

Something to keep in mind while you are reading all of this information is that homosexuality is not considered a mental disorder by major mental health organizations. Prior to 1973, this was not the case; homosexuality was listed as a disorder in the manual of mental illnesses that guides mental health professionals in diagnosis. At the same time, if you have same-sex attractions and are experiencing conflict, confusion, or frustration because of those attractions or because your religious convictions oppose same-sex sexual behavior, then there are some ways for professionals to understand your experience.

**Homosexuality is not considered a mental disorder by major mental health organizations.**

One of those diagnoses in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual that mental health professionals may use to make sense of your situation is Sexual Disorder NOS (Not Otherwise Specified). This category is reserved for a number of concerns, including “persistent and marked distress about sexual orientation.” Essentially this means that you are troubled by your sexual attractions and/or orientation. Another diagnosis that may fit what you are experiencing is called an Identity Problem. This diagnosis is used when individuals are uncertain about more than one of the key areas of their identity, like their religious identity, sexual orientation, moral values, and so on.

Finally, if you are more sad or anxious than usual you might be diagnosed with a disorder that takes into account depression or anxiety. It is quite common for people who have same-sex attractions or a homosexual orientation to also experience these sorts of symptoms, even substance use (e.g. nicotine, alcohol, marijuana, etc.). It is possible that you may have developed these feelings as a

result of societal or family rejection, because the strategies you are using to cope just are not working, because the internal conflict you are experiencing is so emotionally draining, or a host of other reasons. Regardless of the reasons, we realize that you might be experiencing other negative feelings in addition to possibly being conflicted about having same-sex attractions.

### **Counseling and Therapy: Intervention**

After the information-gathering part—the assessment phase that may lead to a diagnosis—therapy moves on to the intervention stage. If a counselor were to address your concerns about your same-sex attractions instead of just treating the other issues you might have, there are a few different ways that a counselor might work with you. Many counselors use a “gay-affirmative” approach and may think of you as essentially gay, while also encouraging you to think about yourself in that way. We refer to this as “gay integrative” therapy because it would essentially assist you in integrating, or pulling together, your experiences of same-sex attraction into a gay identity.

Other counselors might recognize your religious conflicts and assist you in stopping behavior that contradicts your values. We talk about this as celibacy-based therapy or chastity-based therapy because the focus is on changing behavior. Changing behavior may be helpful because you will feel more at peace if you are not violating your own standards for your sexual behavior and because of the health risks associated with sexual behavior outside of the context of a monogamous relationship.



Some professionals might recognize your conflicts and offer counseling (or a referral to another counselor) intended to change your sexual orientation. This type of treatment is currently very controversial and many mental health organizations have expressed concerns about it—suggesting that sexual orientation cannot change or that it might be harmful to attempt to do so. The research here is again not particularly well-designed, but some studies do suggest that some people report a change in their behavior and (in some cases) orientation. The research on potential harm in trying to change is also poorly designed and there are mixed results. Some individuals report being psychologically or spiritually harmed when they pursued change; others have said they were helped.

Still other counselors might focus more on your sexual identity, much like we do here at ISSI. The focus of sexual identity therapy is to aid you in figuring out how to live your life in a way that is consistent with your beliefs and values. Put differently, we essentially assist you in aligning your behavior and identity with your beliefs and values. This approach also considers how you identify yourself and your sexual preferences privately (to yourself) as well as publicly (to others). As the main goal of our therapy approach, we would encourage you to move toward congruence between your values and actions.

The way we would help you reach congruence is by having you reflect on the messages you have received about same-sex attraction. Some of these messages are explicit, and others are implicit, but both types are undoubtedly influential and exist in our culture in the way we talk about same-sex sexuality. For example, one of the main metaphors you might encounter is the discovery metaphor. The message in this metaphor is that you are already gay, and that you are coming to discover this about yourself. In other words, you are

“born this way” and need to come to grips with it. In contrast, the integration or adoption metaphor acknowledges that you experience same-sex attractions but suggests that what matters now is what you choose to do with your attractions. You can integrate them into a gay identity (or adopt a gay identity), or you can decide not to adopt a gay identity. This metaphor empowers you to make your own decisions about who you are, how you label yourself, and how you would like to present yourself to others. We also know some

**The messages you get about your attractions can influence how you identify yourself. We want to empower you to make decisions about your identity that are congruent with your values, beliefs and attractions.**

individuals who decide to identify as gay, but they transform the meaning of the word gay because they choose not to engage in same-sex behavior. Remember that the popular meaning of “gay” suggests behavior—that attractions lead to behaviors, which express who you “really are.” Some people decide that “gay” means they have these attractions but they decide not to

engage in behavior for personal or religious reasons.

Overall, we would want to focus on helping you write a story for your life regarding your behavior and your identity that is more congruent with your beliefs and values. To do this, we would highlight the meanings that you are making out of the reality that you are attracted to the same sex. Do your attractions mean that you are a different kind of person (e.g., a homosexual or gay person rather than a heterosexual or straight person), and is it best to distinguish types of people based upon their feelings of sexual attraction? Or do your attractions exist but not make up who you are as a person? There are

many other possible ways to make meaning that might shape your overall sense of yourself and your identity. But, we strongly believe that the choice is yours regarding how to edit your life’s story based on what you believe, your values, how you feel about your sexuality, and how you want your life to proceed from this point.

### Ministry Approaches

Although ISSI encourages individuals to seek out the expertise of mental health professionals when they experience distress about same-sex attractions, we recognize that there are other helpful resources that exist outside of the offices of counselors and therapists. These are what we call “paraprofessional” groups. They may be run by laypeople interested in helping certain groups of individuals, or they could be run by people who have received more advanced training or education. Many of these organizations are religiously-affiliated and focus on “healing.” In other words, leaders of such groups would encourage members to appeal to God to take away their experiences of same-sex attraction and possibly even to change their orientation to one that is heterosexual. Our concern here is that such an emphasis may add pressure on those who attend to report changes or to place their value or worth on the capacity to become heterosexual, which can often be discouraging to participants over time.

However, not all of these groups would maintain that “change” is their primary goal. Some might instead focus on helping their members achieve a chaste or celibate lifestyle that would be in line with their religious beliefs and values. The following are examples of the types of ministry approaches we are speaking of:

Exodus International, Courage, and Homosexuals Anonymous. It is important to know that these organizations may or may not be consistent in their approach throughout the various chapters and sub-organizations spread among the regions of the United States. However, as a whole, they typically offer some of the following services: counseling, mentoring, worship services, individual accountability, and support groups. One advantage of seeking out paraprofessional approaches as a resource is meeting other people who may experience similar struggles; we have been told over and over again that such groups help those who are same-sex attracted not to feel so alone and isolated. In addition, these groups tend not to be as costly as professional services, and are therefore sometimes more manageable to maintain involvement in—especially if long-term support is something you desire.

### Special Considerations

We want to close with a number of special topics that may be of importance to you, including the language you use to talk about your experiences, how to deal with possible family, marital, and religious issues, the challenges of living a single life, and multiple ways to be a sexual minority.

### Use of Language

At ISSI, we encourage individuals to carefully consider the language they use when talking about their sexuality. You may have observed that, most of the time when people talk about homosexual feelings or same-sex attractions, they automatically say a person is “gay.” In other words, they equate a person’s feelings of attraction with his or

her identity; however, that is not necessarily accurate. For example, consider one of our studies of college students on Christian campuses. Although 245 students reported experiencing same-sex attraction at some point, only 82 (33%) reported having a bisexual, homosexual, transsexual orientation or preferred not to answer. A majority of these students still publicly and privately identified as heterosexual. Although we cannot speak to why this is, it is clear that same-sex

“ We prefer to talk about same-sex sexuality using three distinct terms: attraction, orientation, and identity. ”

attraction may not always lead directly to a gay identity.

We prefer to talk about same-sex sexuality using three distinct terms: attraction, orientation, and identity. You might think that we are “splitting hairs” here, but many of the people we have worked with have found our ideas helpful.

When we use the word attraction, we are referring to the romantic emotional connection or the physical arousal one experiences toward the same sex. When individuals report experiencing these attractions persistently and regularly over time, we refer to that person as having a homosexual (or bisexual) orientation. A gay (lesbian, or bisexual) identity, however, takes things one step further. Such identities function as labels that communicate something about individuals to others—typically that they are attracted to the same sex but also

oftentimes that they engage in same-sex behavior or are open to same-sex relationships. Interestingly, before modern day, people did not used to label themselves “gay.” It was language that simply did not exist.

Why might this language be helpful? Many people we work with have found the freedom to be descriptive when using this language, rather than feeling forced to put themselves in a cultural category that seems to conflict with their beliefs and values. You may certainly decide to integrate your attractions into a gay identity, or you can draw on other aspects of your identity to talk about who you are and what defines you. We know many people for whom being male or female is more important than whether they are attracted to males or females; others talk about their religious identity as being more important, like when Christians say that their primary identity is “in Christ.”

**By being descriptive about your experiences you are not identifying yourself as one thing vs. another based on your attractions alone!**

In any case, if you find yourself being attracted to individuals of your sex, you could simply state that. “I am a woman and I find other women attractive.” (“I am a man and I find other men attractive.”) Or, “I find myself emotionally drawn to others like me.” In this way, you are being descriptive. You are simply describing what you are feeling. You are not labeling your identity as one thing versus another solely based on your experiences of attraction.

## Family Issues

It is our hope at ISSI that you are surrounded by family members and loved ones who are supportive of you, understanding, empathic, and interested in learning about your unique struggles. However, we recognize that this is not always the case. Many of you may have withheld the fact that you experience same-sex attractions from your parents or others because you feared their reactions; others of you may have already disclosed this reality and experienced firsthand some negative and emotionally charged responses.

For those who have shared with your family or are thinking of doing so, consider a few things. You likely have been dealing with feelings of frustration, confusion, grief, curiosity, anger, excitement, and so on for years and have hopefully had time to process your emotions. Your parents, siblings, and other loved ones have not had that time. So realize that they may need some time to feel all of these same emotions. They might be shocked, dismayed, confused, angry, or fearful for your future. Each person will react differently and will take different amounts of time to process the information you shared with them. You cannot expect them to be at the same place you are in your understanding of your situation immediately. You might do well to cut them a little slack—you can prepare for what is coming; they cannot.

**“When you say, “I am gay,” to your loved ones you are taking on a socially constructed identity that seems pretty permanent to them...”**

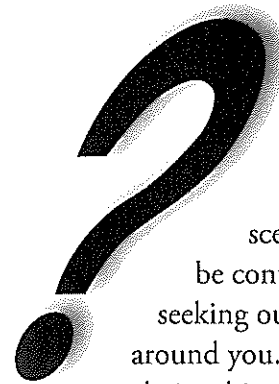
As a side note, consider using the three terms we just discussed. When you say, “I am gay,” to your loved ones you are taking on a socially constructed identity that seems pretty permanent to them and brings along with it many stereotypes and assumptions that may or may not apply to you. Instead of using somewhat “loaded” terms, using the language we provided may be helpful for you in simply describing your attractions, what you are experiencing, and what decisions you have and have not made regarding how you are going to live your life.

Even when you are careful to use descriptive language and have given your loved ones time to process their emotions, they may still interact with you in very hurtful ways. Perhaps they talk to you frequently about how you should try to change your orientation—maybe by getting involved in ministry group, going to therapy, or praying harder. In these cases, it may be helpful to involve a family counselor. A third party might aid your loved ones in talking about their fears for you. Maybe they are worried that you will not get married or have children in the traditional way. Maybe they are over-concerned about health risks and AIDS and need more information from a source that they see as trustworthy and authoritative. Maybe they are concerned that your faith in God is not strong enough. Sitting down in honest conversations with them, especially with a moderating person

**Difficult family issues such as these may need the help of a trained mental health professional.**

present, may dispel some of these fears. Some of their expectations for “success for you” (e.g. marriage, children) may be transformed as you talk about the goals you have for yourself. In talking with you, they may realize that you are, in fact, following what you believe is God’s moral standard for your life.

Of course, your loved ones do have a right to retain the morals and



values that they do, just as you have the right to choose what morals and values that you hold. Yet, a counselor might help all of you negotiate how you might maintain a healthy and caring relationship even if you disagree. In a worst-case scenario, when interactions with loved ones prove to be continually upsetting and unhealthy, you may consider seeking out others to form a sort of non-biological family around you. All of us need support and caring interpersonal relationships to remain psychologically healthy and to feel fulfilled in our lives.

Some of you might experience the opposite of the types of reactions we have been discussing. It is possible that you have decided to remain sexually celibate, and that your family is pressuring you to “settle down” and allow yourself to fall in love and be in a long-term relationship. Again, counseling can be a place for you to help your loved ones hear about and understand another part of your identity—the part that might strongly hold beliefs and values that are important to you.

### **Marital Issues**

While this section may not apply to you, we want to acknowledge that some of you may be in what we call mixed-orientation marriages—or marriages in which one partner is heterosexual while the other partner experiences same-sex attraction. First, we would like you to know that you are not alone, as it is estimated that there are approximately two million or more same-sex attracted individuals that are currently or have been heterosexually married. Mixed-orientation couples certainly face unique challenges, including:

negative emotions after disclosure, feelings of betrayal or mistrust, sexual difficulties, deciding whether to tell children and how to deal with their reactions, figuring out how to navigate religious and other social communities, and possibly having to overcome the traumatic impact of an affair. But, many still maintain their marriages and experience healing and growth as they reconfigure themselves as a couple. While we will not delve deeply into possible solutions to the difficulties we mentioned here, we would like to provide with you with a few tips.

We do encourage you to again consider your use of language when talking with your spouse. Are you saying “I am gay and I’m glad you finally know who I am?” Or are you saying “I experience same-sex attraction, and I need help sorting out what all of this means.” We would also caution against making a rash decision about whether to divorce or stay in your marriage; it can be very beneficial to wait until the initial crisis has cleared (if you have just disclosed your same-sex attractions to your spouse) and realize that you have time to make such a decision that will undoubtedly impact the life of your family. Many of these issues can be helpful to discuss with a counselor, psychologist, or another neutral and sensitive third party, such as a spiritual advisor. Such individuals may help you and your spouse improve the way you cope with your problems, provide education, help you find meaning in your difficult circumstances, and help you find some solutions that consider the beliefs and values that each of you hold.

**Making a three-tier distinction between same-sex attractions, a homosexual orientation, and a gay identity can help both partners speak the same language.**

What we have found in our research so far is the people who are in mixed orientation marriages have told us that communication is important to them—finding ways to talk to one another regularly and often, to be transparent, and so on. Another area is a sense of closeness and cohesion as a couple, a sense of “us” (rather than two individuals living together). Still another area that people have said is important is forgiveness—being willing to forgive one another and to let go of unforgiveness. Lastly, we would note that it can be important to have or be working toward healthy sexual intimacy in your marriage. Some of these issues are related to same-sex sexuality, while other issues are part of a larger fabric of marriage that are similar in some ways to what other couples might also experience.

### Singleness

Same-sex attracted individuals who have decided to remain single in order to facilitate a sexually chaste or celibate lifestyle experiences numerous challenges that often go unrecognized by their loved ones. During our work at ISSI, people have talked about grieving the dreams of getting married and having children in the way they had hoped, and generally feeling out of sync with their peers as they age. In addition to the loneliness they feel and the realities of dealing with physical and sexual arousal that often goes unrelieved, they speak of feeling as if the timelines of their lives are “off” and that it is increasingly more and more difficult for them to relate to their peers and vice versa. Further isolation sometimes occurs when some religious and community organizations fail to plan events that are sensitive to all life circumstances of their members and perhaps overemphasize events for married couples with children.



Despite the challenges of single life, many people have chosen to find meaning in a positive view of celibacy. For some, it is a countercultural action that allows them to live out their values in a very real way. For others, meaning is found in the fact that they must rely heavily on the sustenance of their faith. If you are someone who is living a single life, or is considering singleness, we would encourage you to be intentional about creating a support system around you to curb isolation and to also foster authentic personal relationships with individuals who respect and might help you uphold your values. Although difficult, it may be worthwhile to seek out friendships with those who do not exclusively admit people to their social groups based on whether or not they are married, have children, or have other areas of commonality. A diverse group of friends and loved ones on different life timelines and with varying life circumstances may be enriching and fulfilling.

### Religious Issues

We have interwoven language concerning religious beliefs and values throughout this resource, but would like to specifically address religious issues here as we realize that many people are distressed by their experiences of same-sex attraction largely due to conflict they experience with their faith. If you are a person of faith, you have probably found that religion is a source of purpose, meaning, and comfort for you. However, you may also be experiencing conflict related to your faith for several reasons. Perhaps you feel disappointed that God failed to take away unwanted same-sex attraction, or robbed you of the opportunity to fall in love or get married as many of your friends and family members have been able to do. You may be wondering why God

allows such pain and suffering and where God is in the midst of these experiences.

Perhaps you are not upset with God, but you are considering turning away from your faith because your religious community has rejected you, or continually talks about people with similar struggles as you in hurtful, degrading, and condescending ways. Maybe you are struggling with the traditional religious teachings of your faith and are unable to make sense of them as they relate to you. Again, we are not able to provide all of the answers for you. However, we would like to tell you that these are very common experiences for religious persons who are same-sex attracted. Many have been successful in retaining their faith and their beliefs despite these challenges.

Some individuals have reflected on sacred texts and their meanings, comparing them to the teachings of their religious communities. A Christian, for example, might realize through such reflection that God has asked her to remain celibate outside of a heterosexual marriage and does not necessarily ask her to get married. Likewise, God might ask her to refrain from sexual behavior, but does not require that same-sex attractions be distinguished.

Other individuals are helped by finding a place of worship that is nonjudgmental and sensitive to their needs; or, they are helped by praying and seeking out resources that talk about both faith and pain/suffering. Additionally, others are helped by consulting with spiritual advisors such as pastors, biblical counselors, spiritual directors, or other clergy. As you can see, there are many forms of potential support within your religious tradition.

### There are Multiple Ways to Be a Sexual Minority

As we have stated before, our work here at ISSI is focused on helping those we work with to come to an identity—particularly a sexual identity—that aligns with their beliefs and values. This process takes into account all of who a person is: their attractions and desires, their gender, their intentions and behavior, their culture, and their perspectives on morality. We seek not to prescribe any “right” or “wrong” process, and certainly realize that many persons do not make the same decisions about their sexual identity. Indeed, there are multiple ways of being a sexual minority.

In our research, we have found numerous labels that people choose when they have resolved their conflicting identities. Some decide that they are “gay,” “lesbian,” or “bisexual.” Others decide that they are a “gay Christian” (or belong to another religious affiliation); they have reconciled their religious beliefs and their sexual behavior in a way that they do not think offends God. Some who place themselves in this category also transform the meaning of the word “gay” to communicate they are same-sex attracted but refrain from sexual behavior. Some continue to call themselves “heterosexual,” believing that this is the way they were made by a Creator. Others prefer to simply identify themselves by other parts of who they are, like as a “father,” or a “musician,” while other prefer no label at all. Choosing a label can be extremely

**You are attracted to people of the same sex, but...you have to decide whether to integrate your attractions into a particular identity or choose not to for reasons that are your own.**

However, sometimes labels can cause individuals to unintentionally truncate who they are and lead others to make assumptions that may not necessarily be true. Therefore, we encourage you to take your time in evaluating what is right for you with regard to how you will be as a sexual minority, and what words you might choose to reflect that way of being with yourself and others.

We want to encourage you as you navigate the terrain of sexual identity. There are many options in front of you, many decisions that you have the opportunity to make. We hope that ISSI can be a resource to you during this time of decision-making.

**“ We encourage you to take your time in evaluating what is right for you with regard to how you will be as a sexual minority, and what words you might choose to reflect that way of being with yourself and others. ”**

### New Developments in the Field

In many respects, the study of sexual identity development and synthesis is a relatively new and exciting area of research. Many models exist to try to explain how sexual identity develops over time among people who experience same-sex attraction. Yet we continue to learn so much by conducting research in this area. Several research projects are underway through ISSI and elsewhere to further our understanding in this area. ISSI will be publishing research and practical resources as they are developed. It is also important that individuals and families affected by sexual identity concerns continue to stay involved in the developments in this area. Individuals and families willing to participate in ongoing research projects (involving sexual identity development and synthesis, religious coping, sexual identity therapy, and so on) taking place at ISSI should contact the following address:

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School of Psychology and Counseling  
1000 Regent University Dr.  
Virginia Beach, VA 23464

Thank You!

Thank you for taking the time to read through this material. We want to encourage you as you take the courageous steps of learning more about your experiences, make decisions about your identity, and seeking out resources during this journey.

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<http://www.sexualidentityinstitute.org>

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