

Q: After many years in a marriage to a man that was unfulfilling intimately and emotionally, I met a woman I am extremely attracted to. At this point I know I am not straight, but I'm not sure if I'm bisexual or lesbian. How do I know for sure?



ask a gay

BY KRISTIN FLICKINGER

A: My test is simple. Sexuality is about sex. I want to have sex with only women. There are men whom I love deeply. But the thought of sex with them is completely unappealing—whereas women I'd never spend my life with have visited me in my dreams. That makes me a lesbian.

I have a friend who identifies as "bisexual, but not bi-emotional." She's attracted to both men and women, but because of the emotional fulfillment missing in her relationships with men, she doesn't date them.

Don't beat yourself up about it if you're not sure. It might be a moving target for you. A lot of people find their sexual orientation shifting throughout their lives. Attraction to both genders is a lot more common than we talk about in our society—or even in our community.

It seems like bisexual and lesbian women are two very different groups of people. Why is that?

Being gay is like being a member of a club—a somewhat secret club. There are relatively few of us in the world. Even if it's 10 percent of the population, that's not a lot. And being gay still isn't totally accepted,

which means that 90 percent of the world doesn't know a lot about us. When we find each other, we have a common language, and shared experiences. We have slang, and jargon, and little inside jokes.

Many of us—both those who grew up knowing we were gay, and those who came out later in life—went through struggles, whether it was being teased in school, or losing bits and pieces of acceptance by our families and friends. A huge percentage of "street kids" identify as LGBT.

There are gay people who, if given the choice, would rather be straight. They'd rather be accepted in society, and not fear physical attack. They'd rather be "normal," get married and have a white-picket-fence kind of life. So it can lead to resentment when we see someone moving between the two worlds—the one we're in and the one we might rather be in.

When I was coming of age during college, embracing my lesbian self and coming out, I had a problem with the idea of bisexuality. I thought it was a cop-out: an unwillingness to do the work to discover who you were, or a way to have more than one partner at a time.

The idea of "choosing" to be gay was a big issue then. I remember expressing my discomfort with bisexuality to a friend. She asked me, "Did you choose to be gay?"

"Of course not!"

"Well, I'm attracted to both men and women. It's not something I chose. You think that's easy?"

She had a good point. That question really shifted the way I think about bisexuality. I actually think coming out as a bisexual can be equally, if not more, difficult.

Out bisexuals don't fit into the straight community, because they're "queer." And they've faced alienation within the gay community because of the perception that they may at some point live, undetected, in the world that so many of us have tried desperately to fit into.

Additionally, many lesbians who don't live in relationships that require traditional gender roles shrug off the social norms that dictate how women "should" look and act. Women pursuing relationships with both men and women might appear different from lesbians, because they inhabit a world where

relationships require men to look and act like "men" and women like "women."

In the end, both groups of women are very diverse. There are super-butche bisexual women, and ultra-femme lesbians. And many of us would never give up being lesbian in order to be "normal."

Typically, how do people transition from straight to bisexual or lesbian?

I can't give you a roadmap. But I can tell you that there are a lot of women in the community who have done just that. The first step is realizing that you belong somewhere in the LGBT population. From there, the process is up to you. Start meeting people. Pick up a local queer paper, or look online for a dance party in your area. Many places have gay outdoor groups that can give you a way to get to know the community, and how you most comfortably fit into it.

Once you start meeting people, you will find that many share your story of self-discovery. In fact, I know very few people in the community who aren't still on that journey to some extent.

And, wherever you feel safe, keep having conversations. It will help us consider each other and where we come from, and give us a better sense of our community.

Welcome! JO

KRISTIN FLICKINGER writes about her own adventure of self-discovery at midleap.com.

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