

Gender IDENTITY & sexual orientation

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I don't know about you, but I grew up during a time when things like sexual orientation and gender identity just weren't talked about. As progressive as my parents were (I had a charter subscription to *Ms.* magazine at age 10), sexual orientation and gender identity were terms we just didn't use. As Archie Bunker of "All in the Family" said, "Girls were girls and men were men."

Now we live in a world that uses terms such as "gender fluid" and "non-binary." It can be quite confusing and upsetting for many. How do we talk about this topic that can be so emotionally charged for some people?



As a therapist, I see people every day who are grappling with LGBTQ concerns from all sorts of angles. There are teens who are sorting out how to tell their parents that they are confused about their sexual attraction to peers of the same gender. There are middle-aged individuals who married and raised children and are now making terribly difficult decisions to come out as lesbian or gay. I have witnessed firsthand the excruciating pain and unexplainable joy as individuals transition from their natal gender to the gender that is congruent with their heart and head. All of this can be challenging for their families and friends.

Although traditional and social media have made us much more aware of these issues, these topics are not new. In literature as early as the fifth century B.C.E., the Greek tragedian Aeschylus tells of Achilles speaking to his deceased male companion Patroclus of "our frequent

kisses" and more. In the *Satyricon*, written by Petronius in the first century, we see the first Latin work describing a male-to-male love relationship. Over time we have seen a variety of fictional works that portray everything from love relationships to tragedy based on the moral or attitudinal temperature of the times.

The German film *Different from the Others* (1919) tells the story of a violinist who falls in love with his male student. When he first became aware of his sexual orientation, he tried to change it. This appears to be the first film in which a character commits suicide as a result of how their sexual orientation impacted their life and the lives of others.

Less common has been the circulation of literature and film regarding transgender individuals. *A Florida Enchantment* (1914) is a silent film about a woman about to be married who eats a seed and turns into a man. The fiancé is an effeminate man, and both characters are attracted to both genders. The film may have been the first to depict transgender and bisexuality.

Examples of more recent portrayals of transgender individuals in popular culture include the novel *The Danish Girl* (2000), Laverne Cox's role in the TV series *Orange*

is the New Black and Jeffery Tambor's role in *Transparent*.

Although many of these are works of fiction, the challenges faced by many individuals with LGBTQ concerns are very real. The rate of suicide is estimated to be four times higher among youth who identify as LGBTQ than among heterosexual youth. Forty percent of adults who identify as transgender report having made a suicide attempt. And LGBTQ youth who have highly rejecting families are 8.4 percent more likely to have attempted suicide than their LGBTQ counterparts with no or low levels of family rejection (*The Trevor Project, 2015*).

Substance use disorders, anxiety and depression also occur at a higher rate in the LGBTQ population, according to a 2015 study by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration.

Further, LGBTQ people are more likely to be targets of hate crimes than any other minority group.

What does all of this mean? It means that we have to talk about it. No matter how hard the conversation becomes and regardless of our values, religious views, morals and attitudes, we can't afford not to talk about these concerns. We don't have to agree, and we don't have to convince anyone else of our opinions. We do need to come into the discussion from a place of love and peace.

If you suspect that someone in your life is grappling with LGBTQ concerns, start a conversation. If you need support, enlist the guidance of a knowledgeable therapist. Discussions in a safe and neutral environment can pave the way for deep and more meaningful relationships for all concerned. 