

## ***Part II. Experimenting with Opinions about Gay Men***

Repeat the phases and steps in part I, this time focusing on the image of a gay man.

### **Self-Awareness Activity 12.2 What Do You Know About Gay Persons?**

**Purpose:** To see what you know about the issues covered in this chapter

**Instructions:** Determine whether you think the following statements are basically true or false—and think about why. The answers will emerge in this chapter, and the summary at the end of the chapter focuses on these issues. Repeat this exercise when you have finished reading the chapter.

1. You can always tell gays by the way they act, dress, and talk.
2. Gay persons tend to influence young people to become gay.
3. The American Psychological Association takes the position that gays are mentally disturbed and need therapy.
4. With the proper therapy and motivation, gays can become heterosexual.
5. Most studies indicate that gay couples have difficulty raising normal children.
6. If a person has one or two sexual experiences with someone of the same sex, he or she is gay.
7. Most researchers conclude that gay persons are born with a gay orientation.
8. Gay persons are protected from workplace discrimination throughout the United States.

## **Stereotypes and Realities**

Gays must deal with some of the most vicious and degrading stereotypes and myths, and they probably suffer from more distorted or invalid stereotypes than any group. The effects are devastating, and antigay prejudice ranges from trivial snubs to violence. While most Americans still do not approve of a gay sexual orientation, they are against discrimination and for equal treatment in the workplace.

Many of the stereotypes reflect beliefs about outgroups in general, usually portraying out group members as both threatening and inferior to members of the dominant ingroup. Adam (1978) and others found that gays, African Americans, and Jews all are perceived as animalistic, hypersexual, over-visible, heretical, conspiratorial, and inclined to physical and mental disease.

### ***Stereotype #1. Gays cluster in certain occupations.***

Many people believe that gay men flock to the ingroup occupations of hair stylist, designer, dancer, and similar creative, “feminine” jobs. In fact, the gay men who happen to choose such occupations are more likely to come out for the simple reason that gays are more accepted in those jobs. Meanwhile, people are unaware of the many gay men who work in the more masculine occupations because most stay in the closet in order to survive.

**Reality:** Evidence suggests that gays and lesbians do not cluster in a few occupations but are found in a wide range of different occupations as diverse as the general population. A survey of 4,000 gay persons found more gay men and women in science and engineering than in social services; 40% more in finance and insurance than in entertainment and arts, 10 times (1,000%) more in computers than in fashion (Fortune 1992). The true part of this myth is that some gay employees feel forced to cluster in certain jobs or departments because they feel safe there and unsafe in other, perhaps more appropriate, areas (McNaught 1993).

### ***Stereotype #2. People who associate with gays are probably gay too.***

This belief is sometimes called “courtesy stigma” or stigma by association. When heterosexuals associate with gays, only to be suspected of being gay themselves, they

may respond with anger or they may back off. Courtesy stigma, therefore, can create barriers to gays' establishing the support networks and mentor relationships they need for career success. It can block competent researchers from addressing gay issues because of the tendency of the general public to assume that heterosexuals would not be interested in these topics. Closet gays' reaction to courtesy stigma is frequently fear of disclosure and thus avoidance of association with other gays.

### ***Stereotype #3. Gays in sensitive or high-level jobs are a security risk.***

This stereotype is downright vicious in its impact. No evidence has appeared to support the belief that gay persons represent an increased security risk. But the myth persists in this form: Gay employees try to keep their homosexuality a secret; therefore, they are easy blackmail targets for con artists and spies, which in turn makes them a security risk, so they shouldn't be hired or promoted into sensitive or high-level jobs (Johnson 2004). Author G. Herek reasons that if this were true, the fair solution would be to remove the stigma from homosexuality and protect them from discrimination, not to use the "potential blackmail target" rationale for inflicting further discrimination (Herek 1993).

**Reality:** In 1995 President Clinton signed an executive order barring the use of this criterion for personnel decisions involving placement of federal employees.

### ***Stereotype #4. Gay persons don't have normal, lasting relationships.***

This stereotype depicts gay persons as people who drift from one sexual liaison to another, ending up alone when they're old.

**Reality #1:** Studies indicate that most gay persons very much want to have enduring, close relationships and many do. About half of gay men and three-fourths of lesbian women are involved in steady relationships at any point in time, according to most studies. The few studies that have included older gay persons have found that relationships lasting 20 years or more are not uncommon.

**Reality #2:** Research also indicates there are no significant differences between heterosexual and gay persons on any of the measures of relationship satisfaction. Further, when couples were asked the best things and worst things about their relationships, researchers found no significant differences in the responses of gay and heterosexual couples, all of whom reported a similar range of joys and problems. The point is not that all gay couples are happy and problem-free but that they are not any more prone to relationship dissatisfactions and difficulties than are heterosexual couples.

Another aspect of this stereotype is that gay persons don't have normal relationships with friends and therefore don't have strong support networks.

**Reality #3:** While they do experience psychological stress from social rejection and stigma, most gays have made significant progress in overcoming these obstacles and creating rich, satisfying social networks. Overall levels of support received by gay men and women are similar to and slightly higher than those reported for heterosexual men and women. (Peplau 1991).

### ***Stereotype #5. Gay men act feminine and lesbians act masculine.***

Most heterosexuals believe that gay persons possess the characteristics of their opposite sex. They also believe the reverse side of the coin, that men who act feminine are likely to be gay and women who act masculine are likely to be lesbian (Minton 1986).

**Reality #1:** In fact, gayness itself does not establish the types of sexual roles and behavior people will adopt. The expression of sexuality is diverse and functions along a continuum, rather than in an either/or manner. To refute the stereotype we can recall how the late film star Rock Hudson shocked the world when he came out, especially the women fans who idolized him as the essence of masculine attractiveness.

A conflicting stereotype is that gay partners take on clear husband and wife roles, which seems unlikely if both gay male partners act feminine, and likewise if both lesbian partners act masculine.

**Reality #2:** In fact, masculine-feminine roles have sometimes been important in the past, but in recent years gender-linked roles have sharply declined. In fact, most gay couples today actively reject traditional husband-wife or masculine-feminine roles as a model for enduring relationships. Most are in dual-earner relationships, with neither member the exclusive breadwinner, and each having some economic independence. Any specialization of activities is based on individual skills or interests rather than sex-role stereotyping. While many partners report that there is some sense of a masculine-feminine or husband-wife fit, it's subtle. The most common relationship pattern is the partner model that emphasizes companionship, sharing, and equality.

### ***Stereotype #6. Gay sex is immoral and gay persons are promiscuous.***

This is a religious or philosophical belief and therefore cannot be rationally proved or disproved. Constitutional rights concerning the separation of church and state provide some protection in the legal system and in the workplace against discrimination based on such personal beliefs.

**Reality #1:** A certain percentage of any population engages in promiscuous sex, at least during a certain phase of their life, regardless of sexual orientation. The sexual behavior of gay persons who are in the closet, especially married persons, usually stems from their fear of discovery and the resulting need for secrecy and anonymity.

Related to the belief that gay sex is immoral is the belief that AIDS is God's punishment upon gay persons, a viewpoint promoted by certain Christian ministers.

**Reality #2:** In fact, AIDS is not a "gay disease." Anyone can contract AIDS; it just happened to gain a foothold in the gay community first. Ignorance about the disease has led to the myth that people who come into contact with gay persons are exposing themselves to AIDS. However, AIDS can only be contracted through sexual intercourse or through the bloodstream. Therefore, casual contact in the workplace is not a threat.

### ***Stereotype #7. Gay persons are a bad influence on children.***

The extreme form of this belief is that gay persons are sexual perverts and therefore tend to be child molesters. Scientific studies have repeatedly disproven this stereotype. Each year a few straight and gay persons are convicted of child molestation, regardless of sexual orientation.

One aspect of this stereotype is the idea that gay men are looking for very young men and boys as partners.

**Reality #1:** Research indicates that a majority of gay men aged 18 to 24 prefer a male partner who is older, a majority of those aged 25 to 34 prefer a same-age person, and of those older than 35 about half prefer a younger partner. It was found that the degree of emphasis on youthful partners varied with the social setting and reflected the diversity of the gay community. It also probably reflects the tendency of older men in the larger American culture to prefer younger partners (Harry 1992).

Another fear is that gay persons will influence children and youth to become gay. This false fear is the basis for trying to bar gay persons from becoming teachers, counselors, and youth group leaders—and to deny gay parents their child custody rights.

**Reality #2:** Since the preponderance of evidence suggests that sexual orientation is fixed by biology early in life, this stereotype has no basis in fact or experience. No evidence exists that a gay teacher or parent could convert a child, even if he or she tried.

Related to the "bad influence" myth is the belief that gay persons should not be allowed to raise children. Until recently courts routinely denied parental rights to gay

persons. Some judges have based their decisions on the rationale that such children would be teased and stigmatized by other children and adults.

**Reality #3:** Chief Justice Burger once said that the Constitution “cannot control such prejudices but neither can it tolerate them. Private biases may be outside the reach of the law, but the law cannot, directly or indirectly, give them effect” (Palmore 1985 p. 62).

Related stereotypes about lesbians as parents include:

- They don’t care for children in maternal ways.
- They hate men and deny their children access to positive male role models.
- Their lesbianism is a sort of illness that makes them unfit to be parents.

**Reality #4:** New ideas about family life have opened up the idea of gay persons having an active family life that includes children. In fact, 20% of gay male couples have children, as do 34% of female couples (Census 2010). Research on gay parents clearly indicates that their lives are remarkably like those of heterosexual parents. Far more similarities than differences are found (Pawelski 2006).

Studies indicate that lesbian mothers do not differ significantly from heterosexual mothers in maternal attitude, self-concept as parents, attitude toward marital and maternal interests, current lifestyles, and child rearing practices. Lesbian mothers are more likely than heterosexual mothers to be child-centered (as compared to adult-centered or task-centered). There is no evidence that a lesbian mother is more likely to negatively influence her child’s development, nor that the child is more likely to become gay (Weisner 1990; Patterson 2012).

### **What’s In a Name?**

The American Psychological Association’s (APA) Committee on Lesbian and Gay Concerns in 1991 adopted the following guidelines for terminology recommended to psychologists:

*gay male* and *lesbian*, rather than homosexual

*gay persons*, when referring to lesbians and gay men as a group

*antigay prejudice*, instead of homophobia

*bisexual*: persons attracted to both same-sex and opposite-sex partners

Later, a couple of new designations developed:

*transgender*: persons who believe their physical gender doesn’t match their emotional and psychological gender

*GLBT*: the gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender movement

*Homophobia* is still used by many persons when referring to prejudice and discrimination against gay persons. Homophobia originally meant an irrational fear of same-sex eroticism, which was an appropriate use of the term. But in the 1970s it came to mean a fear or dread of gay persons, a prejudice against gay persons, or a general intolerance and disapproval of gay persons. The term *phobia* is not descriptive of such emotions.