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A RESOURCE GUIDE TO COMING OUT AS BISEXUAL



BiNet USA

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Welcome

Coming out — the process of being open about your sexual orientation or gender identity — is different for every person. For bisexual people, coming out can present some unique challenges. As bisexual people, we face skepticism and stereotypes about our sexuality, we are ignored and excluded from lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ) spaces, and we are often invisible to each other — challenges that can make coming out a complicated process.

Coming out can also be wonderful. It can relieve the stress of having to hide part of yourself, and it gives you the ability to bring your whole self to your life and your relationships. It can also give you the chance to be a role model to others and help you connect with the bisexual community and others who support and celebrate your identity.

This guide is designed to prepare you for potential challenges of coming out as bisexual and to give you the tools to come out and live openly wherever and whenever you are safe, able and ready.



What Does It Mean to Come Out as Bisexual?

“ I call myself bisexual because I acknowledge that I have in myself the potential to be attracted — romantically and/or sexually — to people of more than one sex and/or gender, not necessarily at the same time, not necessarily in the same way, and not necessarily to the same degree. ”

— Robyn Ochs

Many bi community members and advocates have embraced Ochs' definition of bisexuality because it is inclusive of different kinds of attractions to people with a range of gender identities. In addition to those who identify with the word “bisexual,” the bi community includes those who call themselves pansexual, queer, fluid, omnisexual, non-monosexual, in the middle sexualities, heteroflexible, homoflexible, polysexual and a variety of other labels that indicate attraction to more than one gender. National bisexual advocacy organizations and others use the term “bi+” to include all of these identities, a term popularized by the Bisexual Organizing Project.

Something that many bisexual people don't know is that there are so many of us. According to the Williams Institute and the HRC Foundation's own research, **about 50 percent of people who identify as either gay, lesbian or bisexual, identify as bisexual — making the bisexual population the single largest group within the LGBT community.** In HRC's 2012 survey of more than 10,000 youth from across the United States,

“

I've often found it difficult to express to people that the gender of the person I'm attracted to doesn't define my identity, especially when people assume I'm gay. I use a queer approach to my sexual identity, mentioning people I'm attracted to or experiences I've had. Many people will then use the term 'bi' to describe me, and if that helps them understand, then I'm happy.”

— Jordan Long



38 percent of LGBTQ youth identified their sexual orientation as bisexual, with another 12 percent describing themselves with other terms indicating attraction to more than one gender.

A new report from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) shows that about 7 percent of women and 4 percent of men in the United States who are 18 to 44 years old identify as bisexual. Recent studies also show that younger generations — 29 percent of Americans from ages 18 to 29 and 24 percent of Americans from ages 20 to 44 — are much more likely to express some degree of attraction to more than one gender.

Despite these numbers, for those of us who are attracted to more than one gender, coming out is often met with skepticism and stereotypes, even from our fellow members of the LGBTQ community. People frequently make assumptions about our identities based on the gender of our past or current partners, and we often find ourselves having to come out over and over again if we want to correct those assumptions.

While coming out as bisexual can be difficult, it also allows us to live fully and openly as ourselves and to make sure that those around us — like our friends, families, doctors, therapists, colleagues and community members — see us as our whole and authentic selves.

Coming Out to Yourself

Even as LGBTQ visibility has increased in recent years, messages abound telling us how we're supposed to behave and whom we're supposed to love based on the sex we are assigned at birth. From the movies we watch to the magazines we read to the politicians we elect, those in the spotlight are often heterosexual and cisgender (non-transgender). We're also asked to define our identities and attractions into categories like gay, lesbian or straight.

But what about those of us whose romantic and sexual attractions cut across boundaries and binaries of sex and gender? **In too many cases, people who express some degree of bisexuality are pressured — from both non-LGBTQ and gay and lesbian communities alike — to “choose” or “pick a side,” meaning to identify as gay, lesbian or straight.** So the first step toward coming out as bisexual is often the self-realization that we cannot “choose” or “pick a side” any more than straight, gay or lesbian people can choose whom they love or find themselves attracted to. When we do come out as bisexual, we often face stereotypes about our sexual behavior — that we're promiscuous, incapable of fidelity or have unsafe sexual practices — behaviors that, in reality, occur among people of all orientations and identities, and to which bisexual people are not unusually prone.

With these realities, it's no wonder that bisexual people are less likely to be out when compared to their gay and lesbian peers. A 2013 Pew Research

Center study found that only 28 percent of bisexual people were out to those closest to them, compared to 71 percent of lesbians and 77 percent of gay men. When bisexual people remain closeted, we are often invisible to each other and to the communities we are a part of, which can make us feel isolated. But before we can come out to other people, we have to figure things out for ourselves.

Some Tips for Coming Out to Yourself

- Ignore external pressures and stereotypes as much as you can. Your identity is yours alone to understand, define and share with others. No one gets to tell you how you should identify.
- It's OK if you've come out before as another identity, if you've only been in relationships with people of one gender or if you've never been in a sexual or romantic relationship at all.
- Bisexual people can come out at any stage of life — whether we're single, married, parents, teens or seniors.
- It's totally normal to feel scared, confused or uncertain. It's also totally normal to feel relieved, empowered and proud.

“Your identity is about you and only you can decide it. People will try to tell you who or what you should be attracted to, but resist that and don't let anyone else decide who you are.”

— Paolo Veloso



Coming Out to Others

Why Come Out?

Most people come out because it becomes too hard to continue hiding who they are. Whether it's to strengthen a relationship or just to be open and honest with people in your life, most people find that coming out is liberating. When someone comes out as bisexual, it also helps teach others about the bisexual community and dispel the harmful stereotypes about our identities.

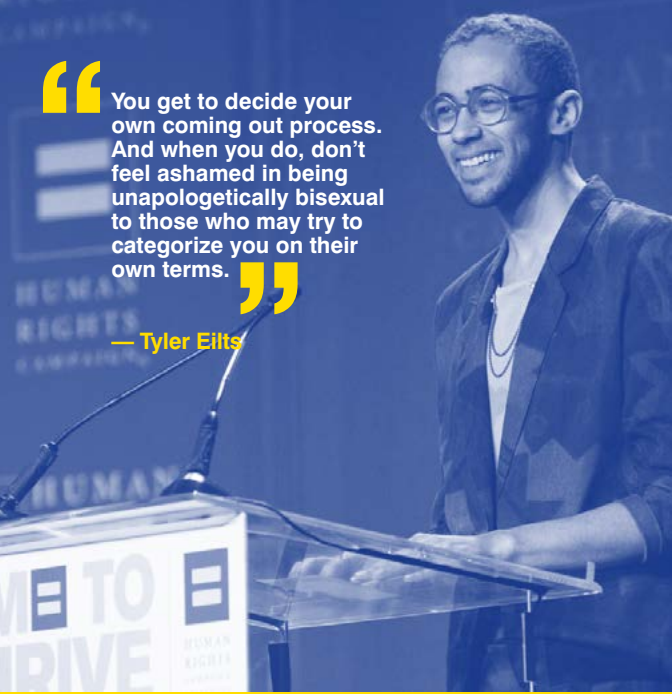
By making ourselves visible, we can help other bisexual people feel less isolated and can empower others to live openly.

Some benefits of coming out:

- You can live an open and whole life.
- You can develop closer, more genuine relationships.
- You can build self-esteem from being known and loved for your whole self.
- You can reduce the stress of hiding your identity.
- You can connect with others who are bisexual.
- You can be part of strong and vibrant LGBTQ and bisexual communities.
- You can help dispel myths and stereotypes about bisexual people.
- You can become a role model for others.
- You can learn about the bisexual community's rich history of organizing and leadership.
- You make it easier for bisexual youth and others to follow in your footsteps.

Some risks of coming out:

- Not everyone will be understanding or accepting.
- You may lose a current romantic relationship.
- Family, friends and coworkers may be shocked, confused or even hostile.
- Some relationships may change permanently.
- You may experience harassment or discrimination.

A photograph of Tyler Eilts, a young man with glasses and a beard, smiling while speaking at a podium. The podium has a sign that says "ME TO LIVE" and "HUMAN RIGHTS". The background is a blue wall with "HUMAN RIGHTS" visible. The image is overlaid with a blue tint.

“ You get to decide your own coming out process. And when you do, don’t feel ashamed in being unapologetically bisexual to those who may try to categorize you on their own terms. ”

— Tyler Eilts

- Your physical safety may be at risk.
- You may lose a job or housing.
- If you are a teen or young adult, especially if you are under 18, you may be rejected by your parents or caregivers, thrown out of your house and/or cut off financially.

Ultimately, you are the only one who can decide when, whether and to whom you come out. In many cases, the benefits outweigh the risks, but your safety and well-being should be the deciding factor.

Making a Plan to Come Out

When you’re ready to tell that first person — or even those first few people — give yourself time to prepare. Think through the options and make a deliberate plan of whom to approach, the right time to do so and how to do it. Here are some things to consider:

- **Do I know what I want to say?** When people are at the beginning of the coming out process, they may still be sorting through what it means to be bisexual and may not be ready to face stereotypes or rejection or answer difficult

questions. That's OK. Even if you don't yet have all the answers, your feelings and safety are what matter. To get a better idea of what it is you want to communicate, try writing it down to help organize your thoughts.

- **Whom should I tell first?** This can be a critical decision. You may want to select people who you think will be most supportive, as their support can help you share with others.
- **What's my plan?** Think through the options and make a deliberate plan of whom to approach, the right time to do so and how to do it. This kind of news can travel quickly. If you'd prefer that the people you tell keep your news confidential, be sure to tell them so, and plan for the chance that someone you tell may not stay silent. Don't be surprised if someone, intentionally or not, shares your news with others before you have a chance to do it yourself.
- **What kinds of signals am I getting?** Sometimes you can get a sense of how accepting people will be by the things they say. Maybe an LGBTQ-themed movie or a character on a TV show can get a discussion started. Or maybe someone in your life has told you that they joined an LGBTQ rights organization. Don't read into these conversations too closely. The most LGBTQ-friendly person in the office may react negatively, and the person who said something insensitive about LGBTQ people might end up being your strongest supporter.
- **Am I well-informed and willing to answer questions?** People's reactions can depend largely on how much information they have about bisexual people and how much they feel they can ask. While more and more people are familiar with lesbian and gay people, they may not know much about bisexual people beyond stereotyped portrayals in popular culture. If you're well-informed and open to answering questions, it can go a long way toward helping others to understand. Check out the resources at the end of this guide to help you.
- **Is this a good time?** Timing is key, and choosing the right time is up to you. Be aware of the mood, priorities, stresses and problems of those to whom you would like to come out. If they're dealing with their own major life concerns, they may not be able to respond to your disclosure constructively.

Making Sure You Are Safe

If you have any doubts about whether someone will react positively to your coming out, carefully consider your options and take steps to make sure you are safe.

Ask yourself:

- Have I ever heard this person talk about LGBTQ people? Did they say things that indicate acceptance of LGBTQ people?
- How well do I know this person? Have I ever seen them act harshly or violently?
- Does this person have influence over my job, housing or other necessities?

Some ideas for ensuring your safety:

- Let a friend or someone else you are already out to and who is supportive know what you're doing ahead of time and make a plan to check in with them before and after.
- Consider bringing that supporter with you.
- Consider coming out in a safe space like in a therapist's or guidance counselor's office, or in an LGBTQ community center.

Dealing With Negative Reactions

While many people in your life will likely continue to love and support you when you come out, chances are you may experience a negative reaction at some point in your coming out journey. Some tips for dealing with negative responses:

- If you feel at all unsafe, leave and find a safe place.
- Reach out to people who support you when reactions make you feel hurt, sad or depressed. If that support isn't enough, consider talking to a counselor or joining a support group at your local LGBTQ center.
- Give people time to come around. In many cases, an initial negative response doesn't mean total rejection. Some people just need time to process this new information and gain acceptance and understanding.

Coming Out to Different Groups of People

Coming Out to Family

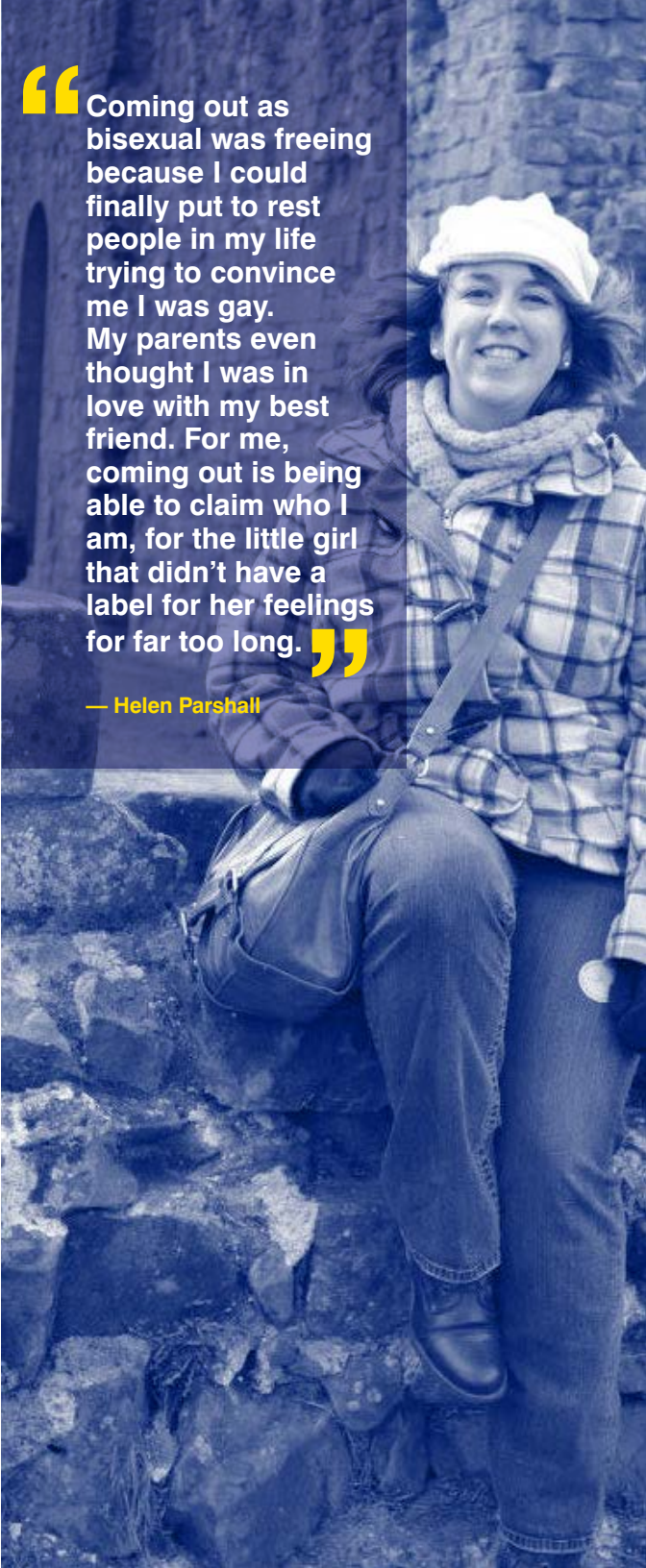
Whether you're a teenager or an adult with a family of your own, coming out to your family can be scary. While many parents and family members will react with support and affirmation, some won't, and family rejection can be painful. If you're under the age of 18 or financially dependent on your parents or other family members, weigh your options carefully before coming out to them.

Some reactions you may want to prepare for:

- Some parents or family members will feel honored and appreciate that you have entrusted them with an important piece of truth about yourself.
- Some parents or family members may react in ways that hurt. They may cry, get angry or feel embarrassed. They may even kick you out of your home.
- Some parents or family members will need to grieve the dreams they had for you before they see the new, more genuine life you are building for yourself.
- Some parents or family members may ask where they “went wrong” or if they did something to “cause this.” Assure them that they did nothing wrong.
- Some parents or family members may tell you “it’s just a phase,” or “you’re being rebellious,” or “you just want attention.” These stereotypes may take some time to overcome.
- Some parents or family members may call being bisexual a sin or may attempt to send you to a counselor or therapist in the baseless hope that you can “change.”
- Some parents or family members will already know you’re bisexual — or they might have an inkling or think you’re gay or lesbian. They may have been waiting for you to tell them and find your doing so a relief.

“Coming out as bisexual was freeing because I could finally put to rest people in my life trying to convince me I was gay. My parents even thought I was in love with my best friend. For me, coming out is being able to claim who I am, for the little girl that didn't have a label for her feelings for far too long.”

— Helen Parshall



It may take time for a parent or other family member to absorb or come to terms with your coming out. Good or bad, their initial reaction may not reflect their feelings over the long term, but it is important to realize that even if they respond negatively, there's a good chance they will come to accept and even celebrate your identity. You should also prepare for the possibility that they may reject you and make you leave your home, so it's good to have a safety plan — a friend you can stay with or a bi-friendly LGBTQ youth shelter to go to — just in case you need it. If you're in college, you may be eligible for financial aid independence if you feel unsafe at home after coming out. Check out the resources listed at the end of this guide for more ideas if you are facing homelessness because of family rejection.

Coming Out to Friends

When you're ready to come out to friends, you may be lucky enough to have some who are already out themselves or who have an LGBTQ friend or relative of their own. Often, however, coming out to a friend can be scary.

Here are some things you may want to consider:

- Your friends may surprise you. Those you thought would be least judgmental may be the first to turn away; those who seem least likely to be accepting sometimes offer the strongest support. Give your friends a chance to be supportive.
- Provide resources. HRC has resources for non-LGBTQ friends and family members to help them understand and learn more. Several other organizations listed at the end of this guide also provide similar tools.

Coming Out to Your Spouse or Partner

Coming out to a spouse or partner as bisexual can be complicated. Whether you are in a same-sex or different-sex relationship, your partner may have assumed that you identify as straight or gay or lesbian. They may feel like something they thought they knew about you isn't true anymore, which may be difficult for them to accept. Additionally, your spouse or partner may hold stereotypes that bisexual people are promiscuous and not capable of committed, monogamous relationships. When coming out to your spouse or partner, prepare yourself for the possibility that they may ask you questions based on these stereotypes, or have trouble trusting you. The important thing is to have open and honest communication and be able to explain to your spouse or partner what this new identity means to you and how it may or may not change things in the relationship.

Although many relationships survive and even become stronger when a partner comes out, always consider your safety and the dynamics of your relationship before making the decision to come out. A partner may use your bisexual identity to gain power over you, and shame or abuse you, so your safety should always be your first priority when deciding whether to come out to a partner or spouse.

Coming Out to Your Children

There's no one right or wrong way to have this conversation with your children, but there are important factors to consider. Depending on their ages, you may be worried about them rejecting you or about their safety at school if they tell friends. If you have a partner, spouse, ex-partner or ex-spouse who is involved in your children's lives, you may want to have the conversation together, if that's possible. Or you might find that bringing another supportive family member into the conversation is a good idea. Your children may have questions that they feel more comfortable asking someone else for fear that they'll hurt your feelings.


While younger children often show a surprising level of understanding and acceptance, older children may need more time to think about the news you've shared with them before they're ready to talk. It may be helpful to arrange a family counseling session to sort through feelings. Additionally, giving your children the ability to talk to other children of LGBTQ parents can be enormously helpful.

Coming Out in Other Contexts

As a bisexual person, you may want to consider some additional factors when coming out in other contexts in your life.

Here are a few things to be aware of:

- **Healthcare Providers** - It's especially important for bisexual people to be out to our healthcare providers because our community — bisexual women in particular — faces major health disparities compared to straight cisgender people, lesbians and gay men. **We're also less likely than gay men or lesbians to be out to our doctors, which means they may not be fully attuned to our sexual health needs.** When you come out to your medical provider, prepare yourself for the possibility that they might not understand bisexuality or may harbor stereotypes about our sexual behavior, and consider bringing some of the informational resources listed at the end of this guide.
- **School** - Although many bisexual students are accepted at school, bisexual youth face higher levels of harassment and bullying than their gay, lesbian and non-LGBTQ peers, making it critical for you to consider your safety and well-being before deciding to come out at school. **If you're being bullied or harassed about your identity, talk to a teacher, counselor or other caring adult.** If your school has an LGBTQ student group, talk to other students who are out about their experiences and the school's climate toward bisexual and other LGBTQ students. When you come out in a school LGBTQ group, prepare yourself for the possibility that there may be some lingering stereotypes about bisexual people. Consider bringing resources with you.
- **Work** - Before you come out at work, check your company's non-discrimination policy and make sure you are officially protected from discrimination in your workplace. If there are other out LGBTQ people in your workplace, ask them about their experiences. Also check out the resources at the end of this guide for information about being openly bisexual in the workplace.



“ For me, coming out as a bisexual man was about taking the mask off and standing affirmed in my personal truth. It is about freedom. ”

— Khafre Abif

After You Come Out

Coming Out Again...and Again

It's not unusual for members of the LGBTQ community to come out to different people and in different ways at different times. A bisexual person might identify as gay or lesbian before coming out as bisexual, for example, or a woman who is openly transgender might also come out as a lesbian. To be clear, **we all have our own journeys of self-discovery and understanding, and there's nothing wrong with changing the way one self-identifies and coming out more than once.**

What is often different for bisexual people is that even if we come out as bisexual, the invisibility of our identities in LGBTQ spaces, along with stereotypes that suggest bisexuality is "just a phase" or "not real," mean that too often people don't believe us when we come out or make assumptions about our identities based on the gender of our past or current partners. Even within the LGBTQ community, people make assumptions about our identities — e.g., if a man dates only women and then has a relationship with a man, he is gay and was just in denial, or if a woman is in a relationship with another woman, she is assumed to be a lesbian, regardless of her self-identification or past relationships.

Correcting these assumptions essentially forces us to come out over and over again, which can be daunting and can expose us to biphobia. So whether you're coming out for the first time or the hundredth time, remember to prioritize your own safety and well-being as you decide when and whether to come out as bisexual, queer, pansexual, fluid or anything else.



“ **After coming out as transgender in my late 20s I also had to remind people I was still pansexual and not heterosexual. I remember telling my dad and he had a terrible response, but with time he has grown to accept me and become one of my strongest allies.** ”

— Laya Monarez

“

Connecting with the bisexual community has been one of the most affirming and empowering experiences in my life. They have taught me the true meaning of acceptance and support.”

— Beth Sherouse



Finding Community

Connecting with other members of the LGBTQ community can be a powerful source of affirmation and support, especially when you are first coming out. It helps to talk to people who have been where you are in your journey, who have overcome obstacles and fears similar to the ones you may now be facing and to simply find spaces to be yourself. An LGBTQ student group at your school or college, or an LGBTQ community center in your area, are both great places to connect with LGBTQ people and find support.

While the LGBTQ community can be welcoming and empowering to bisexual people, it can also, unfortunately, be a place where bisexual people and identities are stereotyped and erased. Because we are sometimes excluded in LGBTQ spaces and others make assumptions about our identities, it is sometimes difficult for bisexual people to find each other. **Many of us know other people who are bisexual, but we don't realize it because we aren't out to each other.** In reality, the bisexual population is about the same size as the gay and lesbian populations combined, and just as diverse — we come from all backgrounds, racial and ethnic groups, faith communities, socioeconomic levels and gender identities — and coming out helps us find each other. Check out the list at the end of this guide for bisexual community groups in your area or ask your local LGBTQ community center if it has a bisexual group.

Glossary of Terms

Many people refrain from talking about sexual orientation and gender identity and expression because it feels taboo or because they're afraid of saying the wrong thing. This glossary was written to help give people the words and meanings to help make conversations easier and more comfortable.

Bisexual — A person who can be attracted to more than one sex, gender or gender identity. “Bi” is often used as an abbreviation. Related terms include pansexual, queer, fluid, omnisexual, non-monosexual, in the middle sexualities, heteroflexible, homoflexible, polysexual and many others.

Biphobia — Prejudice, fear or hatred directed toward bisexual people. This can take the form of stereotypes about bisexuality or excluding or erasing bisexual people from the LGBTQ community (sometimes referred to as “bi erasure”).



Cisgender — A term used to describe people whose gender identity or expression aligns with those typically associated with the sex assigned to them at birth.

Gender Identity — One's innermost concept of self as male, female, a blend of both or neither — how individuals perceive themselves and what they call themselves. One's gender identity can be the same or different from their sex assigned at birth and is separate from sexual orientation.

Sexual Orientation — An individual's enduring physical, emotional, romantic and/or spiritual attraction to another person. Gender identity and sexual orientation are not the same.

Lesbian — A woman who is emotionally, romantically, sexually and relationally attracted to women.

Gay — A word describing a man or a woman who is emotionally, romantically, sexually and relationally attracted to members of the same sex.

Transgender — An umbrella term for people whose gender identity and/or expression is different from cultural expectations based on the sex they were assigned at birth. Being transgender does not imply any specific sexual orientation. Therefore, transgender people may identify as straight, gay, lesbian, bisexual, pansexual, queer, etc.

Pansexual — A person who can be attracted to any sex, gender or gender identity.

Queer — A term people often use to express fluid identities and orientations.



HRC Resources

For general information on bisexuality and the bisexual community, visit www.hrc.org/bisexual.

Resources include:

Bisexual FAQ

www.hrc.org/resources/bisexual-faq

Supporting and Caring for Our Bisexual Youth

www.hrc.org/bi-youth

Health Disparities Among Bisexual People

www.hrc.org/resources/entry/health-disparities-among-bisexual-people

Bisexual Visibility in the Workplace

www.hrc.org/resources/bisexual-visibility-in-the-workplace

Meg Tsuda



Connecting with the Bi Community

National Organizations

American Institute of Bisexuality

www.americaninstituteofbisexuality.org/

bisexual.org/

bimagazine.org/

BiNet USA

4201 Wilson Boulevard, Suite 110-311

Arlington, Va. 22203-1859

800-585-9368

www.binetusa.org

binetusa@binetusa.org

Bisexual Resource Center

P.O. Box 170796

Boston, Mass. 02117

617-424-9595

www.biresource.net

brc@biresource.net

Bisexual Organizing Project

310 East 38th Street, Suite 209

Minneapolis, Minn. 55409-1337

www.bisexualorganizingproject.org/

BOP@BisexualOrganizingProject.org

Local Groups

Check out the **BiNet USA interactive map** or **Bisexual Resource Center's list** to find a group in your area:

biresource.net/bisexualgroups.shtml

www.binetusa.org/bi-groups-in-the-us



The Human Rights Campaign Foundation improves the lives of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) people by working to increase understanding and encourage the adoption of LGBT-inclusive policies and practices. The HRC Foundation builds support for LGBT people among families and friends, co-workers and employers, pastors and parishioners, doctors and teachers, neighbors and the general public. Through an array of programs and projects, the HRC Foundation enhances the lived experiences of LGBT people and their families, as it changes hearts and minds across the United States and around the globe. The HRC Foundation is a non-profit, tax-exempt 501(c)(3) organization.

www.hrc.org



As an umbrella organization and voice for bisexual people, **BiNet USA** facilitates the development of bisexual communities, promotes bisexual visibility, advocates for bisexual community interests and collects and distributes educational information regarding bisexuality. To accomplish these goals, BiNet USA helps facilitate the development and growth of bisexual organizations and individuals across the United States, and encourages participation and organizing on local, regional and national levels.

www.binetusa.org



Bisexual Organizing Project's (BOP's) mission is to build, serve and advocate for an empowered bisexual, pansexual, fluid, queer and unlabeled (bi+) community to promote social justice. BOP was founded in the late 1990s by Minnesota bisexual leaders who were active in local, regional and national bi+ organizing. BOP's initial focus was running the Bisexual Empowerment Conference: A Uniting, Supportive Experience (BECAUSE). The conference continues today as the largest, longest running conference by, for and about bi+ individuals and their allies. BOP's year-round programming includes community events, research, outreach, advocacy and education. BOP is a gold-level GuideStar Exchange participant.

www.bisexualorganizingproject.org



Founded in 1985, the **Bisexual Resource Center** is the oldest national bisexual organization in the United States that advocates for bisexual visibility and raises awareness about bisexuality throughout the LGBT and straight communities by creating and distributing print and online resources, and by community building with other organizations. The BRC envisions a world where love is celebrated, regardless of sexual orientation or gender expression.

www.biresource.net