

Coming out of Marriage: Discovering Your Sexual Orientation Later in Life

By Alison C. Smith, Ph.D.

The process of learning about and accepting one's sense of identity is something that we all go through as part of our lives. This fact holds true for the development of one's sexual orientation as well. For some it is just a natural part of growing up, when boys start having crushes on girls and vice versa. For others, it can be a time of confusion. What does it mean if you find yourself having a crush on your best friend or someone in a TV show who happen to be of the same sex as you? It can be a challenging proposition.

As difficult as the process can be to recognize and identify yourself as being gay or lesbian at a young age, it can be even more challenging when this understanding does not come until later in life. Imagine having been married for 10 or 20 years. Your husband or wife is your best friend, you have two children together, and you are living the "perfect" suburban life. Yet you realize that there is something about all of it that doesn't feel quite right. You followed the path that you thought was right, doing all the things you were supposed to do to make you feel happy but despite your best efforts, you do not feel emotionally fulfilled. Whether it is while you are still married or after your marriage's demise, the process is the same. You realize you are feeling attracted to someone you never expected to be attracted to—someone of the same sex. Whether it is your best friend, your colleague, or a person you just met, the experience can be very unsettling. Perhaps you have had these feelings at some point earlier in your life but tried to ignore them, yet they have come back up again. Some people may experience this process as an "aha" moment in which all of the pieces of the identity puzzle come together. Others find it confusing. Either way, having this realization later in life



puts you in a position to suddenly ask, "Who am I?" and, "What is happening to me?"

Today's culture is far more open to people in the LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, or questioning) community. Gay and lesbian characters are staples in TV shows and movies. There are organizations that are focused on providing support to those who need it. Although some in the LGBT community still feel very marginalized, the modern day reality for someone who is gay is very different than it was 30, 20, or even 10 years ago. Despite this fact, coming out to yourself, much less to others, can be scary.

Regardless of whether you start to recognize that you are gay/lesbian at the age of 16 or 61, there are certain stages in the process of identity development that are common. Dr. Vivienne Cass authored the most widely accepted and empirically supported model of gay and lesbian identity development. People tend to experience confusion when they begin to feel things that make them question their own

sexual orientation, sometimes flat out rejecting the idea that they may be gay or lesbian. They may struggle with feelings of shame and embarrassment as they cope with societal stigma and perhaps their own negative feelings about being gay. As time goes on, however, they start to gain some clarity about their self-image as gay or lesbian. They slowly begin to develop a stronger self-acceptance and begin feel a sense of relief because they have been able to identify some previously unacknowledged emotional and relational needs. Eventually, they integrate their understanding of their own sexual orientation into their overall identity. When this final step occurs, being gay



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or lesbian simply becomes one part of who they are, like their hair color or handedness.

Recognizing your true sexual orientation later in life can be both a frightening and liberating experience. Regardless of whether you are just beginning to question your sexual orientation or have been coming to terms with being gay or lesbian for some time, it is essential to remember to have compassion for yourself.

About the Author

I am a licensed clinical psychologist who specializes in working with lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, and questioning (LGBTQ) individuals, particularly those coping with histories of childhood sexual abuse. I earned a

master's degree in clinical psychology from the University of Colorado at Colorado Springs, and a doctorate in the same field from George Mason University. I have worked with a wide variety of people dealing with a wide variety of problems ranging from coping with significant life events (e.g., divorce, job loss, trauma), to issues such as low self-esteem, identity confusion, and relationship problems, to symptoms such as anxiety, depression and more. To me, the most essential component of psychotherapy is developing a strong therapeutic relationship between the therapist and client. I build upon a foundation of interpersonal psychotherapy and incorporate aspects of other approaches such as psychodynamic, humanistic, and cognitive-behavioral psychotherapy.