



Secret loves, hidden lives?

A summary of what people with
learning difficulties said about
being gay, lesbian or bisexual

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Norah Fry Research Centre
University of Bristol
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David



Men and women with learning difficulties have a right to have the relationships that they want (as long as they are within the law)



This means that it is okay to fancy people of the same sex – to be gay, lesbian or bisexual.



It is okay to fancy someone of the opposite sex – to be heterosexual.



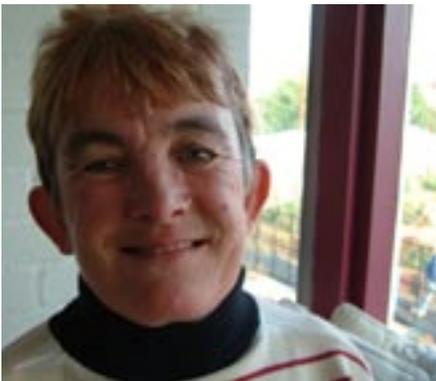
Joyce Howarth and David Abbott are researchers at the Norah Fry Research Centre, University of Bristol. They talked with gay, lesbian and bisexual people with learning difficulties. They wanted to find out what life was like for them.

This is what people told us about being gay, lesbian or bisexual

People said that they started fancying people of the same sex when they were teenagers.



People didn't tell everyone they were gay, lesbian or bisexual. They were frightened of what people would say to them. They worried that they may be told to leave where they were living, or not allowed to use services if they told staff they were gay.



About half of the women and men we talked to knew other gay people.



The rest didn't know anyone else who were gay or lesbian. This made them feel lonely and unhappy.



Almost everyone had been bullied because they were gay or lesbian. Half of the people had been called names or hurt because they were gay or lesbian.

Most of the people interviewed had been depressed at some time in their lives. Two men had tried to kill themselves they were so unhappy. One woman thought a lot about killing herself.

This is what people told us about love



Almost all the men had had a boyfriend and almost all the women had had a girlfriend at one time in their lives.



Only a few of the people we talked to were in a relationship now. Everyone wanted someone to love and be loved.

The people who hadn't had sex with a person of the same sex said they wanted to find out what it felt like. Most of those who had had sex enjoyed it.



Five of the people wanted to have children in a gay relationship.



Four of these people said that staff and family did not want them to have children.

This is what people told us about support

People with learning difficulties wanted staff to support them around being gay, lesbian or bisexual.



One gay man wanted to say to staff, “If you’re not happy with who I am, just say it. I’m not going to change who I am to please you. Tough luck! Get on and like me for who I am, or go and find a different job.”



Joyce and David also talked with staff about working with gay and lesbian people with learning difficulties.



Some staff were doing a really good job in supporting people with learning difficulties who were gay or lesbian.



Most staff waited for a person with learning difficulties to ask for sex education. Or staff waited for the person with learning difficulties to tell staff they were gay or lesbian.



Some staff didn't think it was their job to ask people with learning difficulties what support they needed around sex and relationships.



Some staff worried about working with people with learning difficulties who were gay or lesbian.

Staff worried about whether they knew enough and what people's parents would say.



Some staff said they didn't know if their managers would support them to work with lesbians and gay men with learning difficulties.

This is what people told us about prejudice



Prejudice is when you think badly about someone, or treat them badly just because they are different to you.



Most staff said it was okay for people to be gay. A few staff didn't like people being gay. This is called homophobia.



Nearly all the staff thought that the people with learning difficulties they worked with only fancied people of the opposite sex (heterosexual). They did not expect people to be gay or lesbian.



Joyce and David talked with gay, lesbian and bisexual staff as well. These staff told most of the other staff they worked with that they were gay.



Often staff did not tell people with learning difficulties if they were gay. This was because they were worried that some people with learning difficulties might call them names. They also worried what people's parents might say.

What can you do?

There are things you can do to make life easier for lesbian, gay and bisexual people with learning difficulties.



Think about the gay people you know from TV, or pop stars. Think about the good things about them. Talk about the good things with other people with learning difficulties and staff, and talk about them being gay or lesbian.

This will help to show that you are okay about people being gay, and may help someone to talk with you about their feelings.



If you hear people being called names because they are gay, say that you don't like it. It hurts to be called names.



Ask your local People First group, or staff, for training about everyone being equal (Equalities).

Ask them to include things about gay men, lesbians and bisexual people.



Do the places you go during the day have pictures up of gay men or lesbians?

If not, talk to other people about putting some up.

You don't have to tell other people that you are gay, lesbian or bisexual.

If you do want to tell someone, think about telling someone that you can trust – and who you get on well with.

You can also contact any of the organisations on the next page to talk about being gay, lesbian or bisexual.

This summary comes from a research project called, '**Secret loves, hidden lives? Exploring same sex relationships for people with learning difficulties**', carried out by David Abbott and Joyce Howarth at the Norah Fry Research Centre, University of Bristol. The project was funded by the Big Lottery Fund and carried out as a partnership between the Norah Fry Research Centre, The Terrence Higgins Trust and REGARD.

David and Joyce interviewed 20 men and women with learning difficulties who identified as gay, lesbian or bisexual across the UK and 71 members of staff in different services.

The cover photograph was taken by Jill Rutherford and posed by an actor from the Misfits Theatre Company, Bristol. Other actors kindly volunteered to be in some of the other pictures. Karen Gyde at Norah Fry did the design and layout of the photo-story. The full report about this research, '**Secret loves, hidden lives? Exploring issues for people with learning difficulties who are gay, lesbian or bisexual**', by David Abbott and Joyce Howarth is published by The Policy Press and is available from Marston Book Services on  **0 1 2 3 5 4 6 5 5 0 0** (£15.99 + £2.75 p&p) email **direct.orders@marston.co.uk** A summary of the report is available at **www.bristol.ac.uk/norahfry**

Useful organisations

The London Lesbian & Gay Switchboard is open 24 hours a day and has details of other switchboards across the UK,  **0 2 0 7 8 3 7 7 3 2 4** and at **www.llgs.org.uk**

The Terrence Higgins Trust can give advice and support about HIV and sexual health. The headquarters are in London but they will be able to give you details of the office closest to you,  **0 8 4 5 1 2 2 1 2 0 0** and at **www.tht.org.uk**

REGARD is the UK association for gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender disabled people. They currently offer a penpal and befriending service.

Email: **regard@dircon.co.uk** and see the website at **www.regard.org.uk**

Stonewall are a campaigning organisation for equal rights for lesbians, gay men and bisexuals. They have information on various issues including violence and hate crimes, 'coming out', and gay pride events.  **0 2 0 7 8 8 1 9 4 4 0**
minicom 0 2 0 7 8 8 1 9 9 9 6, email: **info@stonewall.org.uk**
www.stonewall.org.uk

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