

Married Men

PRODUCED BY GAY MEN'S HEALTH

FACT SHEET 2

Marriage and the nuclear family (mum, dad, the kids and the family dog) continue to be represented as the norm in western societies. Television and print media are replete with images of heterosexual couples and nuclear families in both stories and product advertisements. Parents generally have an expectation that their children will grow up, marry and create nuclear families of their own. Growing up within a heterosexually dominant society creates great difficulties for those whose sexuality is other than 100% heterosexual. Life can be very difficult for those men who marry and are also sexually attracted to other men. This fact sheet has been produced as a resource for these men and those who are there to help them work through their issues.

Although we have come a long way since the 1960s when homosexuality was classified as a criminal offence and a mental disorder, coming out as same-sex attracted (gay, bisexual, queer or a man who is sexually attracted to other men) continues to be a difficult journey for many men. Since the 1970s homosexuality has been decriminalised in all states in Australia and discrimination on the basis of sexuality, in employment, education and services is now illegal. Although gay communities have evolved and provide cultural and social connections for those men who identify as gay, bisexual or queer, most married men who are sexually attracted to other men continue to live their lives in secrecy. Many of these men do eventually come out as gay or bisexual with most leaving their marriages and forming new relationships with men. Approximately 20% of men surveyed within gay communities have either been married or living in relationships with women. The option to remain married and have a sexual relationship with another man or men is rarely possible for a variety of reasons. However, there are examples of such arrangements that do work that relate to beliefs in open marriages and polyamory (the capacity to have a sexually and emotionally intimate relationship with two or more partners at the same time).

AM I GAY, STRAIGHT OR BISEXUAL?

Sexual orientation or sexuality can be thought of as operating on a continuum. This was first recognised by Alfred Kinsey, the famous and controversial sexuality researcher who collected data in the 1940s on the 'sexual behaviour of the human male'. Kinsey looked at both sexual behaviour and sexual fantasies and found that these can fluctuate over the course of a lifetime along a continuum from exclusively heterosexual through to exclusively homosexual. Kinsey found that very few men were either exclusively heterosexual or exclusively homosexual in their sexual fantasies and/or sexual behaviours. His most controversial finding was that approximately 37% of all males had at least one homosexual experience, to the point of orgasm, in their lifetime. What Kinsey's work and subsequent sexuality research has shown is that the division of human sexuality into two discrete categories, heterosexual and homosexual, is a social and cultural creation and does not reflect the reality of human experience. Kinsey showed that most men have had sexual thoughts and/or fantasies about men and women at times in their lives and that many men have taken this one step further to include some form of sexual behaviour.



This would appear to be more normal than abnormal. However, it is important to recognise that sexual fantasies about men and sexual behaviour with men don't by themselves equate to identifying as gay. Coming out as gay represents a social and political choice rather than a sexual choice. Fritz Klein, a sexual researcher who followed Kinsey, defines sexuality as combination of 7 aspects:

1. sexual attraction (who you're sexually attracted to)
2. sexual behaviour (who you have sex with)
3. sexual fantasies (who you fantasise about)
4. emotional preference (who you feel more close to emotionally)
5. social preference (who you like to socialise with)
6. lifestyle preference (the community in which you prefer to spend you time and feel more comfortable in)
7. self-identification (the identity or label that you choose)

Each of these aspects can also be thought of as operating along a continuum. For example, a married man may be more sexually attracted to men but primarily have sex with his wife, fantasise about both men and women, feel more emotionally close to his wife, prefer a heterosexual lifestyle and identify as mostly heterosexual.

WHY DO SOME SAME-SEX ATTRACTED MEN MARRY?

The reasons why same-sex attracted men continue to marry include:

- compliance with social norms and family and peer expectations
- wanting a traditional family life that includes raising children
- growing up within a strongly religious family or ethnic culture that views homosexuality as immoral or wrong
- holding the belief that homosexuality is abnormal or unnatural and believing that marriage will 'cure' same-sex attraction
- homophobia or a fear of being gay or recognised as being gay

The growing acceptance of a diversity of relationships other than traditional marriage is providing a safer environment for same-sex attracted men to create lives that are more consistent with their social, sexual and relationship preferences. Legislation has been changed in South Australia and other states in Australia to recognise same-sex relationships and remove areas of discrimination. However, there is more work to be done, particularly in relation to the right of same-sex couples to have children and raise families.

CAN MARRIAGES LAST WHEN HUSBANDS DISCLOSE THEIR SAME SEX ATTRACTION?

Certainly marriages can last when husbands disclose their same-sex attraction. However, this does require being able to reach clear agreements and shared understandings about how same-sex attraction can be accommodated. According to the research evidence, those marriages that have been maintained following disclosure are characterised by:

- honesty and good communication

- a preparedness for the marriage to be open
- beliefs in the diversity of sexuality
- support from family and friends

Social networks associated with bisexual communities and polyamory are generally supportive of open marriages where husbands are same-sex attracted.

WHEN DO MARRIED MEN BECOME AWARE OF THEIR SAME-SEX ATTRACTION?

Of those same-sex attracted men who have married, approximately half had some awareness of their same-sex attraction prior to marriage, another third became more aware of these feelings during their marriage and approximately 8% did not become aware of these feelings until after they had separated. This suggests that same-sex attraction is sometimes, for various reasons, suppressed into the unconscious and emerges later for a variety of reasons. Perhaps the married man had a sexual experience with another man at a beat or in a situational context such as the military or prison. There may be a number of circumstances that can lead to sexual behaviour between men. It is important to understand that the same-sex attraction and the desire to have sex with men is not something that all men are consciously aware of when they marry. The coming out process, regardless of one's ultimate sexual identification, is a gradual process that moves through various stages. These stages may include:

- Awareness of same-sex attraction. This stage may involve confusion about what this means in terms of sense of self and future lifestyle. It may also be associated with denial and suppression.
- Knowledge and understanding. This stage may involve conversations with trusted others, reading and research, and counselling.
- Acknowledgement and acceptance. This stage involves exploring personal meanings relating to same-sex attraction and making lifestyle choices. The sexual orientation model developed by Klein and referred to earlier can be a helpful tool at this stage.
- Disclosure. At this stage individuals usually choose who they want to disclose their sexual orientation to. Disclosure can help if others are affirming and supportive of one's sexuality.
- Socialisation. Having arrived at a sexual self identification the final stage usually involves becoming part of a community in which individuals feel comfortable and want to socialise with others of similar sexuality.

Movement through these stages can be greatly assisted with good counselling.

WHAT IF A MARRIED MAN HAS SEX WITH A MAN THAT PUTS HIM AT RISK OF HIV OR OTHER STI'S?

As most same-sex attracted married men are not attached to gay communities they may not be aware of their risk of contracting HIV or other sexually transmitted infections (STIs). Since the beginning of the AIDS pandemic in the early 1980s openly gay men have been well informed of the risks associated with sex between men because sexual health promotion campaigns have focussed on gay communities. Married men may have become aware of this information if they visited gay saunas and other sex on premise venues or if they have access to gay print media. Married men who have sex with men are advised to become better informed about the risks they may be taking. The use of condoms and water based lubricant remains the most effective way to prevent the transmission of HIV during anal sex. For more information men should contact one of the information services listed below.



REFERENCES

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Grever, Carol (2001). My Husband is Gay: A woman's guide to surviving the crisis. Darlinghurst: The Crossing Press.

Klein, Fritz and Schwartz, Thomas (editors) (2001). Bisexual and Gay Husbands: their stories, their words. New York & London: Harrington Park Press.

SHine SA and the Bfriend Project (2005). Married and same-sex attracted?: a resource booklet.

Suresha, Ron and Chvany, Pete (editors) (2005). Bi Men: coming out every which way. New York & London: Harrington Park Press.

(All of these references are available at the Darling House Community Library, 64 Fullarton Road, Norwood)

INFORMATION SERVICES

Clinic 275 (government sexually transmitted infection clinic) (08) 8222 5075

Gay Men's Health (counselling & support) (08) 8334 1606

Gay & Lesbian Community Services (telephone counselling) (08) 8422 8400

Inside Out Project (The Second Story Youth Health Service) (08) 8232 0233

Man2Man Information Line (08) 8334 1617

SHine (Sexual Health information networking & education) (08) 8300 5300

Darling House - 64 Fullarton Road, Norwood SA 5067
Darling House: (08) 8334 1606

Man2Man Infoline City Callers: (08) 8334 1617
Man2Man Infoline Country Callers: 1800 671 582

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Gay Men's Health works with gay, bisexual and
same sex attracted men in South Australia