Sexual Orientation: What Does It Mean?

First of all, definitions of the terms gay, lesbian, and bisexual are useful. Gay, lesbian, and bisexual are terms that describe one aspect of a diverse group of people…that being their sexuality. These terms don’t describe the totality of a person anymore than describing a person’s hair color does.

There are three major aspects that are often used to describe a person’s sexuality: sexual orientation, sexual behavior, and sexual identity. Sexual orientation refers to “a consistent pattern of arousal that includes sexual feelings, affectional attractions, thoughts, fantasies, and emotional and romantic feelings. It is a predominant erotic attraction for the same or other sex, or both sexes in varying degrees.” It isn’t a choice or lifestyle, but innate sense of attraction for others that people of all sexual orientations experience.

Sexual identity is defined as “a consistent, enduring sense of one’s own sexuality and of repeated sexual feelings, thoughts, and/or behaviors.” Sexual identity is a very personal process. It is how someone views and defines him or herself. Some people know their sexual identity at a very young age, while others may not complete the process of sexual self-identification until adulthood.

Finally, sexual behavior, as you might guess, refers to what people do sexually and it may or may not be consistent with a person’s sexual orientation and/or sexual identity. For example, a person could have a same sex sexual orientation, but have sex with people of the other sex. Someone may be a virgin, but identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual, or “straight.”

So now that you know ways that people define sexuality, what else?

As you may already know, “gay” and “lesbian” refer to sexual orientations and sexual identities in which a person is attracted to someone of the same sex (i.e. gay for males, lesbian for females). The terms “gay” and “lesbian” are generally preferred to the term “homosexual” because they possess affectional, communal meanings, whereas “homosexual” sometimes has a negative connotation. Also, the terms “gay” and “lesbian” were developed within these communities rather than the term “homosexual” that was coined as a late 19th century medical term.

Bisexuality refers to the attraction to both male and female genders. Few people are attracted to both genders with equal strength, but some are. For many people (bisexual and non-bisexual) there are varying degrees of attraction for both males and females. Some gays or lesbians may define themselves as bisexual until they are fully comfortable self-identifying as gay or lesbian. However, for some people their sexual orientation or sexual identity is bisexual. For these people, being bisexual is not a phase; it is not a sense of confusion over their sexual identity-- bisexuality is their sexual identity.

Overall, issues of sexual identity, sexual orientation, and sexual behavior are very individual and require deep reflection and personal choices. This is a process, not a one-time event. So take time to discover who you are.

For further information and resources, stop by the Roosevelt University Counseling Center at either campus or check the racks outside the doors.