

# THE CASS MODEL OF HOMOSEXUAL DEVELOPMENT



What follows is a model for gay identity development. It can help you in understanding how an individual's perspective may be affected by that person's developmental stage. However, as with most developmental models, this model cannot capture the variety of paths different individuals follow. It is important to keep in mind that not all LGBT individuals go through all the stages, that they may not do it in order, and that they may not clearly fit in any one stage at a particular time.

## **Identity Confusion:** *"Could I be gay?"*

*Person is beginning to wonder if "homosexuality" is personally relevant. Denial and confusion is experienced*

**Task:** Ask "Who am I? Accept, Deny or Reject."

**Possible Responses:** Will avoid information about lesbians and gays. Will inhibit behavior, deny homosexuality or attribute it to experimenting, an accident, or being "just drunk".

**Possible Needs:** May need to explore internal positive and negative judgments. Will be permitted to be uncertain regarding sexual identity. May find support in knowing that sexual behavior occurs along a spectrum. May benefit from being permitted and encouraged to explore sexual identity as a normal experience (like career identity, and social identity).

## **Identity Comparison:** *"Maybe this does apply to me."*

*Will accept the possibility that she or he may be gay. Self-alienation becomes isolation.*

**Task:** To deal with social alienation.

**Possible responses:** Individuals compare themselves to others who identify as gay. May begin to grieve for loss of things and privileges she or he will give up by embracing their sexual orientation. May compartmentalize their own sexuality. Accepts lesbian, gay definition of behavior but maintains "heterosexual" identity of self. Tells oneself, "It's only temporary" or "I'm just in love with this particular woman/man," etc.

**Possible Needs:** It is important that the person develops their own definitions.

Information is needed about sexual identity, lesbian, gay community resources.

Individual should be encouraged to talk about loss of heterosexual life expectations.

## **Identity Tolerance:** *"I'm not the only one."*

*Accepts the probability of being homosexual and recognizes sexual, social, emotional needs that go with being lesbian and gay. Increased commitment to being lesbian or gay.*

**Task:** To decrease social alienation by seeking out other gay people.

**Possible Responses:** Beginning to have language to talk and think about the issue.

Recognition that being lesbian or gay does not preclude other options. Accentuates difference between self and heterosexuals. Seeks out lesbian and gay culture (positive contact leads to more positive sense of self, negative contact leads to devaluation of the culture, stops growth). May try out variety of stereotypical roles.

**Possible Needs:** To be supported in exploring own shame feelings derived from heterosexism, as well as external heterosexism. It is particularly important for the person to know community resources.

### **Identity Acceptance:** *"I will be okay."*

*Accepts, rather than tolerates, gay or lesbian self-image. There is continuing and increased contact with the gay and lesbian culture.*

**Task:** To deal with the inner tension of no longer subscribing to society's norm. Should attempt to bring congruence between private and public view of self.

**Possible Responses:** Accepts gay or lesbian self-identification. May compartmentalize "gay life." Maintains less and less contact with heterosexual community. Attempts to "fit in" and "not make waves" within the gay and lesbian community. Begins some selective disclosures of sexual identity. More social coming out; more comfortable being seen with groups of men or women that are identified as "gay".

**Possible Needs:** Continued exploration of grief and loss of heterosexual life expectations. Continued exploration of internalized "homophobia". Need of support to deal with coming out issues.

### **Identity Pride:** *"I've got to let people know who I am!"*

*Immerses self in gay and lesbian culture. Less and less involvement with heterosexual community. Us-them quality to political/social viewpoint.*

**Task:** To deal with incongruent views of heterosexuals

**Possible Responses:** Splits world into "gay" (good) and "straight" (bad). Experiences disclosure crises with heterosexuals as he or she is less willing to "blend in." Identifies gay culture as sole source of support; all gay friends, business connections, social connections.

**Possible Needs:** To receive support for exploring anger issues. To find support for exploring issues of heterosexism. To develop skills for coping with reactions and responses to disclosure of sexual identity.

### **Identity Synthesis:**

*Develops holistic view of self. Defines self in a more complete fashion, not just in terms of sexual orientation.*

**Task:** To integrate gay and lesbian identity so it is an aspect of self, and not the aspect of self.

**Possible Responses:** Continues to be angry at heterosexism, but with decreased intensity. Allows trust of others to increase and build. Feels confident to move out into the community and not simply define space according to sexual orientation.

\* Adapted from: Cass, V. Homosexual Identity Development, 1979, Susan Young, SIUC, 1995, and Western Michigan University's Safe on Campus Program by Gregory M. Weight, Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender Community Office, University of Delaware, March 2000.

**Heterosexism:** The systems of advantages bestowed on people who are heterosexual. It can also be the assumption that all people are, or should be, heterosexual and gender-conforming.

**Heterosexual:** A man who is only sexually and/or romantically attracted to women or a woman who is only sexually and/or romantically attracted to men; also known as straight.

**Homophobia:** Negative feelings, attitudes, actions, or behaviors against LGBTQ people or people perceived to be LGBTQ. It may also be a fear of one's own same-sex attractions.

**Homosexual:** An outdated clinical term used to describe someone who is gay or lesbian. Many people dislike the term since it was used to denote a mental illness.

**Intersex:** A person whose biological anatomy and/or genes vary from the expected male or female anatomy and/or genetics.

**Lesbian:** A woman who is sexually and/or romantically attracted to other women.

**LGBTQQIAA2SPP:** Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Questioning, Intersex, Asexual, Ally, Two-Spirit, Pansexual, Polyamorous

**MSM:** An abbreviation for men who have sex with men. They may or may not identify as gay, bisexual or pansexual.

**Omnigender:** Possessing all genders. The term is used to oppose the idea that there are only two genders.

**Pansexual:** A person who is sexually and/or romantically attracted to people regardless of their gender identity, gender expression or biological sex. This term goes beyond a gender binary.

**Polyamory:** Having more than one sexual and/or romantic partner with the consent and knowledge of all individuals.

**Queer:** A simple label to explain orientations, gender identities and/or gender expressions that do not conform to societal expectations. Some people view this as a term of empowerment and others strongly dislike this term.

**Questioning:** A person who is unsure about their orientation and/or gender identity.

**Same-Gender Loving:** A term used most frequently in communities of color that affirms the same-sex attraction of individuals. The term may be preferred over lesbian, gay or bisexual.

**Sex:** The identification of the biological/physical gender most often categorized as male or female.

**Sexual Orientation:** The part of our identity related to whom we are sexually attracted.

**Trans or Trans\*:** An inclusive term that encourages people to remember all of the identities under the transgender umbrella, including: transsexual, crossdresser, genderqueer, genderfluid, two-spirit, etc.

**Transgender:** In its broadest meaning, this umbrella term encompasses anyone whose self-identity, behavior or anatomy falls outside of societal gender norms and expectations.

**Transphobia:** Negative feelings, attitudes, actions, or behaviors against transgender people or people perceived to be transgender. It may also be a fear of one's own gender non-conformity.

**Transsexual:** A person whose gender identity is not congruent with their biological sex. These individuals may or may not pursue hormonal or surgical means to bring congruency to themselves. Some people dislike this term and prefer the terms: transgender, trans or trans\*.

**Two-Spirit:** A Native American term for LGBTQ individuals with dual or multiple genders. It can mean having both a masculine and a feminine spirit. It has different meanings in different communities.