EXPLORING SEXUALITY

University is a time of immense personal growth and change; the ability to move away from home and meet new people often provides an opportunity for individuals to explore their sexuality for the first time. Whilst society can often lead us to think of sexuality in narrow binary terms i.e. hetero/straight or homosexual/gay, in reality there are many different expressions of feelings, desires and actions that relate to sex. Being at university can thus be very exciting in allowing the chance to explore this in a relatively accepting environment, but also it can be quite lonely and scary at times.

THINKING ABOUT SEXUALITY

Having questions about your sexuality is very normal; there is no rule book that states you have to find the opposite sex sexually attractive, you may like both men and women, you may not be sexually attracted to anyone, or you might be in a sexual relationship with two or more people at the same time. One academic (O’Keefe:1999) identifies over forty different sexual and gender identities, but equally you might not feel comfortable with a label, and your sexuality may shift and change. No-one chooses to be gay, or bi- or a-sexual, but heterosexist prejudice persists and it can be difficult to discuss how you feel, particularly with those closest to you such as family and intimate friends.

COMING OUT

Making the decision to talk to other people about your sexuality can be very difficult, not least because first of all, you will have to ‘come out’ to yourself. Some people will know from a very young age that they are not heterosexual and the process of coming out can feel like a very natural progression. However, for others, the discovery of their sexuality can happen later on in life. Whenever it happens, it is important to take some time to think about why you want to come out, and with whom you want to share this intensely personal information. You have the right to keep your sexuality private, and should not feel pressured or forced to come out. Human nature is such, that once you have told someone, even if you have sworn them to secrecy, chances are that your sexuality can become known to a number of people within a very short period. Are you ready for this?
ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

People often say that coming out to someone outside of their family is a really important first step. Tempting as it might be to have a couple of drinks to give you the courage to broach the subject with your best friend, this probably isn’t ideal. You may both be overly emotional, your friend may not react in the way that you were hoping and there is a chance that you might both forget the conversation in the morning! There is no right or wrong way to come out; whilst there are plenty of on-line forums and websites, offering advice and personal stories, you just need to do what feels right for you.

Whilst some people can find the experience of telling their parents and family easy, for many individuals this can give rise to considerable anxiety as they worry about how their family might react. In our heterosexist culture, expectations of opposite-sex marriage and children from such union predominate, and parents, in particular, can find it difficult to adjust to a different outcome for their child. If you grew up in a very traditional community with strong religious or cultural values, it may take time for your sexuality to be validated – remember you may have spent years privately thinking or exploring your sexuality and coming to terms with it. It may come as a complete shock to your family, and thus their initial reaction may not be one of complete acceptance. Hopefully, given time, they will come to accept who you are and support you fully. Unfortunately, homophobia still exists in many communities, and therefore it is important to draw on other networks of supportive friends if you experience hostility in any shape or form. Some people suggest that arranging to see someone with whom you feel safe immediately afterwards can be really helpful in giving you all time and space to reflect. Fflag (www.fflag.org.uk) has useful resources for families and friends, including a booklet titled ‘I’m Gay: how do I tell my parents?’

BEING OUTED

Your sexuality is a private and intensely personal matter and you have the right to decide who knows. For example, there is no need for your Personal Tutor or any of your lecturers to know, unless you feel that it is appropriate to share this information with them. No-one else has the right to disclose your sexuality without your consent, and being threatened with exposure is not only a form of bullying, but also goes against the University’s Code of Good Practice (Valuing Ourselves and Others) for all students and staff. If you are worried that you are being discriminated against because
ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

of your sexuality, this is a serious matter and you should feel able to bring it to the attention of your Warden, Senior Tutor, or a University Harassment Advisor.

HEALTH CARE

Like anyone, you are entitled to non-judgemental health care, not only for your physical and sexual health, but also your mental health. If you want to discuss any particular aspects of your sexual health and do not feel comfortable talking to your GP about it, you can always go to the Florey Unit at the Royal Berkshire Hospital, Craven Road, which is Reading’s Sexual Health Clinic (tel: 0118 3227202). They run two clinics specifically for LGBT* and gay men, but also offer Drop-in clinics throughout the week at Craven Road, as well as bookable appointments in the ARC at RUSU.

USEFUL RESOURCES:

University of Reading’s LGBT Society meets twice a week for an informal coffee hour – details available on their Facebook page (lgbt+reading(university) or their RUSU web page http://www.rusu.co.uk/organisation/11536/

RUSU Part-time LGBT Officer – lgbt@rusu.co.uk

Support U – Reading based support group providing telephone, email and face-to-face support for LGBT individuals in the Thames Valley http://www.supportu.org.uk/

Counselling & Wellbeing:
Email: counselling@reading.ac.uk
or visit us at the university website: www.reading.ac.uk/counselling  Telephone: 0118 378 4216
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