

Being A Lesbian, Being Alone

A Struggle For Acceptance

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Heather Jones was 16 when she decided it was time to stop hiding the truth.

"I always knew I was different," she says.

Now 17, Heather considers herself the most openly homosexual student in East Hartford High School.

But it's been a perilous process.

Even though there's a greater awareness of gay issues today, with some television shows and other pop culture figures tackling gay themes, teenagers struggle with coming out.

And lesbians -- despite some recent, high-profile role models -- are no exception. They fear rejection by family and community.

Heather's journey began when a student noticed a gay pride rainbow sticker on her lunch box and asked her to join a support group for students with alternative lifestyles.

"It's been pretty slow-going," she says. "I'm not totally out in school yet, but I'm sure a lot of people know anyway. My friends know, but it's hard to come out to a larger audience because I'm afraid of the backlash."

There's an additional anxiety today that can further confuse the process.

"Kids at very early ages have the sense that they have to have a public identity. I have 12-year-olds who are talking about where they're going to go to college," says Dr. Margo Maine, a specialist in female adolescent development at Hartford's Institute of Living.

"It makes girls who are experiencing some sexual-orientation confusion feel they have to solve this problem and decide whether they're gay or not by next week," Maine says.

"Girls need to know it's OK to have these impulses and experience them, but you don't have to decide right now

whether you're gay, bisexual or heterosexual."

Maine says one indicator is a "sustained interest in having sexual relationships with other women."

Fleeting thoughts and fantasies don't count. Maine emphasizes that interest in other women must be lasting, occurring consistently over different periods of a girl's sexual development -- from pre-puberty, through adolescence, into adulthood.

She also emphasizes the presence of a "real disinterest and distaste for relationships with men."

She cautions, however, that a disinterest in men can also be a repercussion from past sexual abuse or trauma.

Heather's honesty about her inclinations has cost her.

"I lost two of my best friends when I came out," she says. She's also heard the usual litany of cruel taunts, sometimes shouted, sometimes muttered at her.

She counts her mother among her biggest supporters. In the fall, she'll be off to Antioch College in Ohio.

Heather says she'll never go into hiding again.

"This is just too important," she says. "If people see I'm brave enough to come out, then maybe they'll say, 'I can do that, too.'"

Ask The Doctor

Dr. Leslie Lothstein is director of psychology at the Institute of Living in Hartford. Lothstein specializes in the study of human sexuality.

Q: Is it, for lack of a better word, normal for teenagers to have sexual feelings or impulses toward members of the same sex?

A: "It's normative. It's normal," Lothstein says. "It's part of the mainstream of thinking and fantasizing that all teenagers experience and so do adults. Not all of one's

experience is conscious."

Q: What's the difference between gender identity and sexual orientation?

A: Much confusion swirls around this one. It's important to keep the concepts straight.

"One's gender identity is very different from sexual orientation," Lothstein says. "The stereotypes tend to ignore that."

Gender identity refers to an internal sense of being male or female as well as behavior and dress associated with a particular gender. Sexual identity refers to sexual preference, whether one is straight or gay. The two are not interchangeable, but people tend to think they are.

Hence the stereotypes of the "dykey" lesbian and the "sissy" gay man.

"Kids tease around the issues and distort the issues," Lothstein says.

The resulting confusion can further stress teens who, while grappling with their gender identity, may not necessarily have issues with sexual identity.

The situation is a little easier for girls. "Girls aren't accused of being faggots or queers because they dress like a boy," Lothstein says.

Q: Why, would you say, has lesbianism taken on a sort of glamorous quality in popular culture in recent years?

"Advertising may play a part," Lothstein says.

"It may be sold as an attractive option. It seems sensitive. The whole, women-know-what-women-want. Women in general are portrayed as seductive and sensuous objects in the media, and that in itself creates a culture of eroticism around the female body."

Other media have also helped raise the lesbian profile.

"We're not just talking about rock music or oddball movies. We're talking about mainstream, homespun TV issues and characters," Lothstein says.

Women, on the whole, are also less threatened by homosexual behavior.

Cindy Crawford gave k.d. Lang an old-fashioned barber's shave on the August 1993 Vanity Fair cover. Try to imagine Sean Connery giving Boy George a manicure on a cover.

Q: Do parents still have a tough time dealing with the notion that their child is, or might be, homosexual?

A: The majority do. There is still a lot of ignorance and stigma about homosexuality.

"A lot of kids are anxious about their identity. There's a lot of families out there that aren't open to dialogue," Lothstein says. "If a parent has an agenda and wants to impose it on the child, the child is in trouble."

Some parents may also be dealing with their own bisexuality.

Moral and religious beliefs, as well as the parental desire to have a child who embraces the same sexual orientation, lifestyle and values, can all play a role. In many cases, the threat of disapproval may be so great, a child may hide the truth."

Q: If a young girl is concerned because she thinks she may be a lesbian or bisexual, what should she do?

"In the best of all possible worlds, a child should be able to go to a parent," Lothstein says.

But this isn't the best of all possible worlds, so fortunately there are other options.

Among the people and places teens can turn to: trusted friends or teachers, gay alliance groups in schools or in the community, and professional therapists.

It's important that teens discuss the feelings they're experiencing and receive the assurance that they're normal.