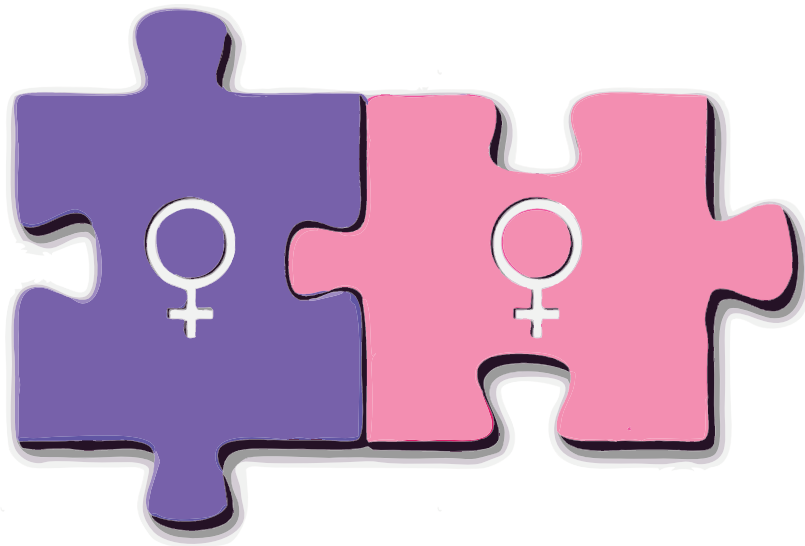


The Little Lesbian Handbook



Lesbian is the “L” in LGBT. Women have loved other women throughout human history, but what does it mean to be a lesbian?
How can we live our lives to the fullest as lesbians?



What is a lesbian?

A lesbian is a sexually-mature human female who is exclusively attracted to other sexually-mature human females. This is a homosexual sexual orientation, also known as same-sex attraction. Lesbians are attracted to both primary and secondary sex characteristics expressed by the XX chromosomes that make a female human female.

What do we mean by this? Lesbians are attracted to female bodies. Essentially, this indicates the female genitals (labia, clitoris, vulva, vagina) but can also extend to breasts, fat distribution, vocal pitch, bone structure, skin texture, and other secondary sex characteristics. Lesbians are attracted to women of all different shapes, sizes and colors, and thankfully women come in all different shapes, sizes and colors.

Homosexuality is found in many animal species, from primates to lizards. It is a naturally occurring biological trait and not a psychological disorder or personal preference.

What do we mean by “attraction”?

As social animals, human beings seek out other humans for mating, physical interaction, companionship, and pair bonding. Attraction can range from finding another person interesting and subtly alluring, to outright physically desirable and sexually arousing. Attraction can grow slowly over time or come on all at once; it can be a fascination with a short interaction or the foundation of a long relationship.

Because lesbians are attracted to others of their own sex, they often bond over similar life experiences. A lesbian sees other women not just as physically or sexually desirable, but also as admirable role-models and sympathetic peers. Due to this shared experience, lesbians, unlike many men, tend not to reduce other women to sexual objects on display for their own gratification.

Lesbians are attracted to femininity only by personal preference; some lesbians love a woman in high-heels and makeup, and others prefer short hair and a tailored suit on their partner. It is the natural woman beneath and her individual expression of herself that matters.

Lesbians and men

Lesbians are not attracted to male bodies and genitals, and therefore often have different relationships with men than heterosexual women. Some lesbians are very comfortable with men and maintain healthy friendships, while others prefer to center their lives around women.

Because our culture is overwhelmingly heteronormative and we are taught from a young age that men and women fall in love, have sex, and marry, a lesbian may feel obligated to date, have sex with, and form intimate relationships with men. Some lesbians spend many years convinced they are straight until they realize the difference between their attraction towards women and the social pressures and rewards of being with a man. Their experiences do not make them any less of a lesbian.

If a woman is attracted to both male and female bodies and desires intimate relationships with both men and women, then she is bisexual.



Lesbians and heterosexual women

Many lesbians find all women attractive, including those who are exclusively attracted to men. Lesbians may idolize straight celebrities and women from history, and sometimes become strongly attracted to women in their lives. For many lesbians, falling in love with a female friend or other close female associate is their first “wake up call” to being a lesbian.

A close friendship with a straight woman can feel very intense and exciting, and may feel like a real relationship at first, since after all, even a straight woman loves her friends, in a way. But it doesn't do any good to dwell on feelings of love for a woman who has a sexual preference for men. A lesbian can value the joyful feeling of loving someone and count it as a positive experience in her life, but it will become a negative experience if she dwells too long on a relationship that will never be.

Most lesbians realize the difficulty and frustration in being attracted to someone who will never be similarly attracted, and learn to focus their relationship goals on other lesbians and bisexual women. The shared experiences of another lesbian becomes a strong point of bonding. No matter how wonderful it may feel to love a straight woman, loving another woman who can actually love you back is a much more rewarding experience.

Accepting Yourself as a Lesbian

Because lesbians hold no attraction towards men and often feel no need to seek male approval, lesbians experience life—sometimes from a young age—very differently from other women. Many lesbians remember childhoods as tomboys, as rough-and-tumble as the boys they grew up with, and bewildered by dresses, ruffles and dolls. Other lesbians may have loved dress-up and got along well with other girls, but found themselves at a loss whenever men became the topic of a conversation. Every lesbian experience is as different as every lesbian, and as she comes to terms with her sexual orientation she often has to come to terms with many aspects of herself, from her personality to her preferences in clothing, her immediate sexual expression and her long-term goals for the future.

The realization of being homosexual can change a woman's relationships with her friends, family, and even her faith. At the same time, fully accepting herself as a lesbian opens up new worlds of inclusion, openness, authenticity, and growth.

Discovering that one is a sexual minority, whether lesbian or bisexual, can be difficult for some people. Depending on where we are growing up, homosexuality and gender variation may or may not be accepted, and may even be outright condemned. Even in tolerant areas, the constant promotion of heterosexuality and lack of examples of homosexuality in our culture can lead a young homosexual to feel deviant.

A young lesbian might make excuses for her feelings for women, or try to make them go away, due to being uncomfortable with being different. She might feel ashamed or depressed, or she may feel like she is not a normal woman. When a lesbian has a negative attitude toward her sexual feelings, that is called internalized homophobia. The road to self-acceptance might include talking to a trusted adult about her feelings, meeting



and learning about other lesbians, practicing positive self-talk, and correcting any negative beliefs she has about homosexuality. Some people may have an easy time accepting their homosexuality and for others it may take years. It's worth it to correct any negative self-concept she may have in order to be able to live a happy life.

Lesbian Presentation and Expression

Lesbian fashion and expression runs the gamut of individuality. Some lesbians may appear like any conventionally feminine woman, with styled hair, makeup, and feminine clothing. Other lesbians may



Alison Bechdel at Politics and Prose, photo by Michael Rhode

prefer to wear their hair short and shop in the men's department. Many lesbians tend towards practical clothing and a nondescript look, while others express themselves through hair color, piercings and creative fashion choices. Some lesbians may desire to be mothers, others may live on farms surrounded by animals. Some lesbians are quiet, some are loud. Some love people and parties, some love quietness and solitude. Most are a complex combination, like any other human being!

Because discovering oneself as a lesbian can be a life-altering experience, seeing and learning about as many other lesbians as possible is very important. Looking at lesbian photography and creative works, reading interviews and lesbian publications, and joining lesbian communities are often essential in realizing how vast and unlimited lesbians are in their appearances, personalities, and lifestyles. There is no one way — or two ways — to be a lesbian.

Experimenting with clothing and hairstyles and allowing your full personality to express itself — sometimes after years of repression — can be exciting and liberating.



Lesbian Sexuality

Lesbians are sometimes asked, “How do two women have sex?” The answer is many ways, actually!

For many lesbians, what they learn about their bodies during masturbation introduces them to what they’d like to do during sex with a partner. Women use their fingers to stroke their clitoris and around the vulva until orgasm occurs. Penetration is not always required and not always desired. Some lesbians may thrust into or “ride” a pillow or other object to bring themselves to orgasm. Many of these experiences carry over to sex with a partner, through fingering and mutual stimulation.

Cunnilingus, or oral sex, is the use of the lips, mouth and tongue to stimulate a partner’s genitals. Sex toys such as vibrators may also be put into play, and a strap-on dildo can be used to perform penetrative sex with no male penis involved.

Lesbian sex as depicted in pornography only vaguely resembles actual lesbian sex. Pornography is produced for the male gaze, and lesbians benefit most in learning about sex through other lesbian and bisexual women and their own personal experiences.

Lesbian sexual preferences are as varied as lesbians themselves, and every woman is different. As with any sexual activity, mutual consent is essential and practicing safe sex remains important. Although lesbians cannot impregnate each other, sexually-transmitted diseases can still be transmitted. Always consider both your partner and yourself with utmost respect.

Expressing your orientation

Aside from sexuality, lesbians should embrace and share their love and attraction for women as a healthy part of their lives. Much of this depends on the receptiveness of close friends and family and the surrounding social environment.

Every lesbian should feel free to indulge in movies, novels, music and art that feature women she finds attractive and relate to her lesbian experience. Fantasies about women and female characters enliven many lesbians’ lives. Some find creative outlets to express themselves, from drawing and painting to writing fan-fiction. A like-minded community centered around creative work can be a source of support and further inspiration.

Many lesbians find strength through centering women in their lives by nurturing female friendships and turning to women at every opportunity. This can range from taking part in women’s groups to choosing a female cashier at check-out. Surrounding herself with women’s history, women’s writing, and the work of women may be deeply healing and empowering for a lesbian.

A lesbian should be able to speak openly and honestly with friends about her likes, crushes, love life, and disappointments, just like anyone else. It is important to find supportive people and cultivate those relationships.



Coming Out

Revealing oneself to be a lesbian is a lifelong process that changes with every situation. A first coming out to a loved one may be nerve-wracking, while later in life saying “Yep, I’m gay,” will come as easily as any other personal detail.

A lesbian must first “come out” to herself, accepting herself as a homosexual woman. This can be both an enlightening and difficult time – it is normal to feel suspended between a joyous new sense of freedom and a deep-seated fear of fitting in. This first step, however, eventually leads to community, support, and the promise of a fulfilling life.

Coming out to yourself isn’t necessarily a one-step process either. Some lesbians are vaguely aware of feelings of attraction toward other women for many years without realizing what those feelings mean. Just because she may experience feelings of excitement in the presence of women she likes, doesn’t mean she makes the connection and identifies her feelings as homosexual. Because we are all taught we will grow up to be heterosexual, it can be confusing to realize that you are not. A lesbian might go through periods of identifying herself in other ways before settling on a lesbian identity. Sometimes the word lesbian can be scary or not feel quite right, and it may take some time to get used to it. There is no rush to label your feelings with any particular word. The important thing is to honor your feelings, not to label them.

Telling a close friend or relative is often the next essential step in coming out. Whether writing a letter or requesting a face-to-face, heart-to-heart conversation, trusting another supportive adult often grants a sense of relief and connection. The confidence this first coming-out experience provides forms the foundation for having the strength to come out to others in the future.

In every situation, a lesbian must judge receptivity, necessity, and risk. Sometimes it is more important to protect personal welfare than to be forthright about sexual orientation. Other times, trusting another person with your orientation and experience may be the best thing a lesbian can do.

Coping with prejudice

Unfortunately, fear and hatred of homosexuality still exists within families and communities. Lesbians who reveal their sexual orientation may become victims of verbal and physical harassment, moral and religious bullying, and even malicious interventions in the form of corrective rape or conversion therapy. Sometimes even a careless remark from a friend can be emotionally damaging, so deeply does homophobia and ignorance about lesbianism pervade society.

In any instance of bullying or bigotry, the knowledge that no homosexual person stands alone is often the greatest source of personal strength. A supportive network of understanding friends and family is, of course, advantageous, but many organizations exist to support and shelter LGBT victims of homophobia and violence, from school-sponsored gay-straight alliances to national coalitions of lawyers, doctors and therapists.



If your surrounding environment is so unhealthy that you feel depressed or suicidal, please reach out for help. The Trevor Hotline exists to provide immediate care and counseling, and can be reached 24-hours a day at 1-866-488-7386 or at thetrevorproject.org.

Lesbian Relationships

Like heterosexual relationships, lesbian relationships range from short-term dating to lifelong marriages. Although generally free from the gender roles of straight pairings, lesbian couples face many of the same difficulties, including conflicting personalities, financial strain, illnesses, and of course the loss of a beloved partner. Even so, studies show that homosexual couples often experience a greater sense of lasting satisfaction in their relationships than heterosexual couples.

Many lesbian couples mark their commitment with a marriage or commitment ceremony and reception like any straight couple, complete with cake and formalwear, and in many places lesbian couples live lives no different than their heterosexual counterparts. Although same-sex marriage is gaining support throughout the world, much more work needs to be done to provide all lesbian couples with full legal rights and social acceptance.

Whether in committed relationships or single, lesbians may desire to raise children. Some lesbians give birth to children naturally through a sperm donor, and some lesbians choose to adopt. Studies have shown that lesbians, in fact, make particularly good parents!

Lesbians may also choose to live on their own, a kind of female bachelor experience. Some may have short-term relationships or long-distance relationships; others may choose to have no relationships at all. In some social climates, a lesbian may find typical relationships with other women difficult, if not impossible.

No lesbian is defined by her relationship status, however. Filling her life with personal contentment, supportive community, and expressions of her love for women is just as important as relationships with other women.



Photo from popsugar.com



Lesbians looking for lesbians

Whether looking for love or sisterhood, a lesbian needs to know where to find others like her. Throughout history, lesbians have supported one another, creating spaces for healing, self-acceptance, and community.

Women's interest groups, music festivals and sporting events have all traditionally provided ground for lesbians to meet and mingle. LGBT spaces and Pride events draw lesbian participants, as well feminist gatherings. Stereotypes revolving around softball teams, nature walks, and do-it-yourself endeavors sometimes hold true, as well!

The Internet has provided further tools for lesbians to connect with one another, from dating applications to informal blogging and Facebook groups. Striking up friendships through online discussions can be a great way for locally isolated lesbians to find support and community.

Lesbians and Gender Roles

Because lesbians have no innate desire to appeal to men, a lesbian's personal expression and lifestyle may contrast greatly from the women around her. A disturbing awareness of this difference — or trauma from being reprimanded by others — can become internalized to the point that a lesbian may feel very uncomfortable with her femaleness and begin to separate her identity from her female body. She may wish to become male or anything other than female. This may also result from the oppression of misogyny and abuse from men.

A lesbian disassociating from femaleness needs the support of other women, particularly those who have survived the same challenges and learned to cope. Learning that a woman is a woman simply by virtue of her female body is often a key part in beginning to heal. No woman must conform to the feminine gender role of being quiet, servile, pretty, and delicate in order to be considered a woman. A woman is a complete and perfect female human being just as she is, regardless of her personality, interests, mannerisms, or way of dress. A woman is never "masculine" or "like a man" because of her attraction to women. A long line of women throughout history have lived and spoken this truth, and becoming acquainted with these women and their contemporaries can reveal new ways to embody femaleness.

A woman's body is a good and natural body, separate from all society demands it to be. Lesbians often need to learn to love themselves as women, apart from the objectification and oppression of women that permeates our society. Mindfulness of the body and yoga practices can help a woman reconnect with her female body, as well as exercises in self-care such as bathing, time spent in nature, and enjoyable physical activity. Learning to love oneself again is not always easy but certainly not impossible.

Although some lesbians may find life livable only if they transition to living as a male some or all of the time, they retain their female experience and their biologically female bodies, often maintaining relationships and sharing spaces with lesbians.

Males who transition away from living as men to living as women through hormones and surgery neither attain a female body nor the lived experience of being female and cannot be considered lesbians. A woman sexually attracted to a transgender woman is not homosexual but rather heterosexual or bisexual.



Lesbian History

Until the last century, same-sex attraction between women was viewed with skepticism or ignored by greater society, with few words to define women who lived their lives loving other women. The word “lesbian”, however, is derived from the isle of Lesbos where the Greek poet Sappho wrote of her love for other women, bearing evidence of same-sex love and attraction between women thousands of years in the past.

Around the world, lesbians have always existed and endured amid the patriarchal oppression of women. Lesbians would sometimes set up house together in “Boston Marriages” if they could support themselves without a man. Women in marriages with men would have affairs with other women, leaving heartfelt letters as clues to the true nature of their relationships. Throughout history, women have cut their hair and donned men’s clothing to live as men, sometimes legally marrying women and living out their lives undisturbed, or undiscovered.

In more recent times as homosexuality became a topic for psychologists, religious leaders, and politicians, love between women became analyzed, pathologized, and demonized. Women have been socially ostracized, committed to institutions, medicated and mistreated in attempts to “correct” their feelings and behavior. Lesbianism became fetishized as well, a fantasy of two objectified women for men to enjoy, skewing public perception further.

Throughout the last half of the 20th century, the gay rights movement has not only revealed and sought to rectify the injustices imposed upon the LGBT community, but has also brought to light the rich and varied history of lesbians, their words, their works, and their contributions to humanity as a whole.



Image from indybay.org



Lesbian Terminology

Lesbians have used many terms throughout history to describe their attraction and themselves. Some of these words include:

- **Gay woman** — Many women who are uncomfortable with the word lesbian will simply call themselves gay women.
- **Dyke** — A lesbian term dating back to the early 20th century, dyke is an alternative word lesbians may use to describe themselves. Used by those outside the lesbian community, it is considered a slur.
- **Butch** — Used to describe a lesbian who forgoes traditional feminine gender roles such as wearing feminine clothing or long, styled hair, the term butch is derived from early 20th century lesbian couples in which one partner had to appear as a man for their public acceptance and safety. It is a lesbian-specific term denoting a particular expression of womanhood.
- **Femme** — Describing a lesbian who feels comfortable with femininity, femme lesbians often wear makeup, styled hair and feminine clothing. This lesbian-specific term was created as the counterpart to “butch” in early 20th century lesbian pairings.
- **Queer** — Still considered a slur by many, in modern times queer is used as an umbrella term encompassing various orientations and identities outside of the heterosexual norm.
- **Non-binary/Genderqueer/Androgynous/Agender** — These words often serve as descriptors for many women defying traditional feminine gender roles, whether lesbian or not.

Lesbian Symbolology

When accepting yourself as a lesbian, sometimes the smallest details make the most difference in developing a sense of self and belonging.

- **The Labrys** — A double-bladed axe, the labrys was a weapon carried by priestesses of the Minoan civilization on Crete, symbolizing strength and self-sufficiency.
- **The Triangle** — In Nazi Germany, an upside-down black triangle was used to designate lesbians, as the pink triangle was used to designate gay men. Like the pink triangle, the LGBT movement has reclaimed the black triangle as a symbol of perseverance. The Lesbian Flag depicts a black triangle on a purple ground, usually with a white labrys within the triangle.
- **Interlocked Female Symbols** — Two female symbols interlocked through the circles are often used by lesbians. Some lesbians celebrate the female symbol alone, as well!
- **The Nautical Star** — In the 1950’s some lesbians would have a five-pointed star tattooed on their inner wrist, which could be revealed in the company of other lesbians.
- **Violets** — Sappho’s poems speak of giving violets to a beloved female companion, and violets have been traditionally exchanged between female lovers for centuries.





- **Amazons** — A legendary tribe of female warriors from Asia Minor, the Amazons were feared by the Greeks who wrote of women riding horses, wearing trousers, and living autonomously without any interference from men. Many lesbians from the feminist movements of the 70's use Amazon as a designation of sisterhood.
- **The Rainbow** — Created to celebrate all aspects of the gay rights movement, the rainbow flag has become a beloved symbol of LGBT people around the world.

Inspiring Lesbians and women who loved women

- Romaine Brooks – painter
- Rose Cleveland – First Lady of the United States 1885-1886
- Sally Ride – astronaut
- Jóhanna Sigurðardóttir – Former Prime Minister of Iceland
- Virginia Woolf & Vita Sackville-West – authors and poets

Lesbian Athletes

- Amélie Mauresmo, Billie Jean King, Martina Navratilova – tennis
- Abby Wambach, Megan Rapinoe – soccer
- Diana Nyad – endurance swimmer
- Brittany Griner – basketball
- Clare Balding – jockey and sportscaster

Lesbian Books and Authors

- Ann Bannon – author (Odd Girl Out)
- Alison Bechdel – comic artist, author (Dykes to Watch Out For)
- Louise Blum – author (You're Not From Around Here, Are You?)
- Rita Mae Brown – author (Rubyfruit Jungle)
- Leslie Feinberg – author (Stone Butch Blues)
- Patricia Highsmith – author (The Price of Salt)
- Audre Lorde – author, poet, activist (Zami: A New Spelling Of My Name)
- Anne-Marie MacDonald – author (Fall on Your Knees)
- Mary Oliver – poet (Dream Work)
- Alice Walker – author (The Color Purple)
- Sarah Waters – author (Fingersmith, Tipping the Velvet)
- Barbara Ann Wright – author (The Pyramid Waltz)



Sally Ride on the Challenger's middeck, 1983. Public Domain image courtesy of NASA.



Lesbian Entertainers

- Sandra Bernhard – comedian, actor, writer
- Ellen Degeneres – comedian, actor, writer
- Lea DeLaria – comedian, actor, musician
- Michelle Ehlen – filmmaker, actor
- Cameron Esposito – comedian
- Hannah Hart – vlogger, writer, actor
- Jane Lynch – actor, singer, comedian
- Kate McKinnon – comedian, actress
- Ellen Page – actress, activist
- Sue Perkins – comedian, writer, actor, broadcaster
- Sandi Toksvig – writer, actor, comedian
- Wanda Sykes – comedian, writer, actor

Lesbian Musicians

- Alix Dobkin
- Melissa Etheridge
- Melissa Ferrick
- Janis Ian
- k.d. Lang
- Meshell Ndegeocello
- Tegan & Sara



Wanda Sykes, comedian, writer, actor. Image from livenation.com



Lesbian Movies and Television

- All About E
- Better Than Chocolate
- But I'm A Cheerleader
- Carol
- Fingersmith
- The Incredible Adventures of Two Girls in Love
- Saving Face
- Tipping the Velvet

Words from fellow Lesbians

“You are allowed to be any kind of woman you want to be with any sort of appearance imaginable. You can love women deeply and earnestly and still be a woman. You can learn to love your body just the way it is, in time. You're most probably going to go through a lot of hardship. Sometimes you will revolt against yourself because of the poisonous hatred given to you by your community for not fitting in. This revolt might be an eating disorder or a deep hatred for your body. You might become suicidal or addicted to drugs. But know that in the end, you're a truly stunning human being, a woman, a lesbian, a lover and nurturer of other woman, a thinker, a do-er. Nothing is wrong or amiss with you because you are gay or because you want to look and act in a way society cannot tolerate. You aren't too masculine or too this or that. And there is and will continue to be a community of strong women for you to turn to.”

“Your sexuality is yours. It is not for male consumption or for males to police. They will try, but they are wrong. You are a full person, not just a reflection of what men want from you. You deserve to be happy. There is nothing wrong about your lack of desire for men. There are other women like you and someday you will find them.”

Useful Links

- Lesbians Over Everything—A Place Where Lesbians Can Share Our Stories
<http://lesbiansovereverything.com/>
- Meg Allen Photography Studio—Pictures of Butch Women
<http://megallenstudio.com/butch/>
- The Wanted Project: Invisible Women/Females of Uncommon Beauty
<https://www.facebook.com/WantedInvisibleWomen/?fref=ts>