

Issues in Gay/Lesbian Relationships.

Above all, we human beings have two relationship challenges: an identity challenge, which involves meeting our own needs, choosing a partner, and identifying as part of a new whole, and a bonding challenge, which involves idealizing another person, merging with them, successfully meeting mutual needs, and finding contentment within the new arrangement.

Gay men and lesbians can and do have sound, satisfactory, and lasting relationships, but these take continual commitment, adjustment, and effort, just as do those of heterosexuals. Keeping in mind that many gays and lesbians enjoy warm and fulfilling relationships, what are some of the special challenges and problematic themes that can arise?

Gay Male Relationships

“Be a man!” What does this mean for gay men? “Love a man!” What are the implications for men who would do this? Although men in our society are socialized to value independence, assertiveness, emotional stoicism, leadership, and achievement (Ossana, 2000; Levant, 1995), gay men (and lesbians) are substantially less conforming to prescribed gender roles in childhood, so gay men can range from stereotypically male to androgynous to feminine in mannerisms, needs, habits, and preferences. Kurdek (1987) found the self-concepts of gay men included more tenderness, compassion, and warmth of expression than those of heterosexual men, but equivalent amounts of assertiveness and leadership.

Still, the challenges facing gay men in relationships can largely stem from the necessity of each partner dealing with his own male socialization and that of his lover. The most troublesome themes are:

1. Independence/dependence (autonomy) – Gay relationships often involve two men who are each more comfortable with independence than dependence, more comfortable with individual initiative than with sharing, more selfish than unselfish—each more comfortable with looking out for his own interests. While this similarity has some advantages, especially at first, in the longer run it can make more difficult the necessary deepening of intimacy, interdependence, and emotional and spiritual connection.
2. Competition (aggression) – Men are hard-wired and socialized for aggression and pushing for their self-centered agendas. They see competition, pointed teasing, and winning as good and non-destructive. They more often use cutting off, denial, and compartmentalization as defenses against losing control. Gay men can find these qualities reverberating in their relationships. On the other hand, some gay men have experienced such harsh aggression in childhood that they have abandoned or suppressed this aspect of their own natures and have difficulty handling or interpreting correctly the aggressiveness of their partner. Learning to seek “win-win” or “taking turns” strategies is crucial, as is learning when and how to cut off emotional escalation.

3. Dominance/submission (leadership) – Men seek and enjoy leadership, and they value being trusted to do the right thing. They have been socialized to view submission, giving in, as weak. Further, they typically lead toward what is their own best interest, not the interests of the group, and they assume the other person is doing the same. On the other hand, men often have had the experience of team sports, which includes power-sharing. Becoming comfortable with co-leadership is crucial to gay relationships, and it is much more to be sought than allowing the relationship to devolve into a rigid, predictable dominance-submission dynamic.
4. Sex (lust) – Heterosexual and gay men can engage in sex too quickly and frequently in a relationship—both to satisfy erotic needs and to feel accepted and important. When this happens, they bond only at the sexual level, making deeper commitment and connection more difficult and less a priority. Men can also use sex to gloss over hurts and fears which really require deeper, more vulnerable discussion. On the receiving end, men may not be comfortable being treated as a sexual object, even temporarily, and they may be more uncomfortable taking than giving.
5. Emotional privacy (pride) – Men can tend to keep hurt feelings to themselves, because revealing them, and the fact of the hurt itself, are considered weak. Men can also have more difficulty apologizing and admitting fault or selfishness. Compartmentalizing and stoicism on both parts can slow the development of trust and intimacy in a gay relationship.

Men have been socialized to seek and expect in love relationships the complementary qualities and responses of women, and while a gay man's partner may have a more developed feminine side, still he is likely to be more a mirror image of the man than a complementary lover. Gay men may be caught off balance by their lovers' independence, competition for leadership and control, discomfort with receiving, aggression in conflicts, sexual assertiveness, and lack of openness and vulnerability.

Also, most gay men have grown up in families where they witnessed how a woman loves and copes with a male partner, for better or worse, but not how a man loves and copes with a man. This means that most gay men in relationships are pioneers in a way, mutually finding their way with each other together.

Finally, our society is less tolerant of cross-gender behavior for boys than for girls, so that gay boys have typically had less opportunity at finding a comfortable identity and social persona. And in our society, being gay and being male have been seen as antithetical, leaving gay boys to feel literally in a "no man's land."

Being a gay man in our society means being a pioneer, and finding healthy gay role models and mentors is as important as finding support from heterosexual friends and loved ones.

Lesbian Relationships

Kurdek (1987) found that the self-concepts of lesbians include more instrumentality (focus, assertiveness) than those of heterosexual women but equal amounts of expressiveness, so that gay women are likely to be less conforming to gender roles and more androgynous and to be varied in their manner, habits, and preferences. Yet in many aspects they are hard-wired and socialized as women, and they have been exposed to more traditional female role-models in relationships. They have seen how men love and cope with women, for better or worse, but not how women deal with women romantically.

Women in our culture are socialized to suppress and deny anger and criticism, to seek and value intimacy and commitment in relationships, to put a higher priority on meeting others' needs, to be sensitive, nurturing, and unselfish, and to be nonaggressive and noncompetitive. While gay men may have to work through issues such as competition and sexual primacy early in their relationships, lesbians may tend toward enmeshment or fusion, where the emphasis is on closeness to the point of blurring individual boundaries. Krestan and Bepko (1980) have speculated that, in the face of societal oppression, lesbians in a relationship can form a "two against the world" stance.

While gay men may experience relationships breaking up too quickly before a deeper connection has been achieved, lesbians can sometimes find themselves lost, trapped, or suffocating in a relationship where safety or mutual reassurance take priority over individual expression and fulfillment shared with each other. Working through issues around independence/dependence (autonomy) is crucial for lesbian as well as gay male couples.

Lesbians may subordinate the sexual aspect of their relationship to the aspects of safety, peace, and cooperation, particularly if one or both partners have been sexually abused or traumatized. Lesbian couples have sex less often than gay male couples and heterosexual couples, regardless of relationship duration. However, 75% of lesbians express preference for a monogamous relationship, and lesbians report equal or greater sexual satisfaction compared with heterosexual women.

As Ossana (2000) has stated, "...lesbians may place primary value on emotional relatedness when choosing a partner, which may subsequently lead to problems with boundary maintenance and sexual desire. Gay men, on the other hand, may emphasize sexual attractiveness when choosing a partner, which may subsequently contribute to problems with emotional intimacy."

Overall, gays and lesbians are assessed as average to above average on psychological tests of personality and psychopathology, and thus are generally psychologically healthy individuals. All intimate relationships, however, require adjustment, learning, and accommodation, and those of gays and lesbians present special challenges while offering unique opportunities for understanding and validation.