

Feeling comfortable with *your* **SEXUAL ORIENTATION**



Québec 

Women and homosexuality

This brochure was written in collaboration with the Centre local de services communautaires (CLSC) des Faubourgs. Its contents were inspired in part by a series of leaflets produced by the McGill University Health Services.

The production of this brochure reflects department orientations aimed at adapting health and social services to homosexuals, published in 1997.

Produced by:

Direction des communications, ministère de la Santé et des Services sociaux

A copy or copies of this document can be obtain in most CLSCs and from community groups working with gays and lesbians, or by sending your order by fax to **(418) 644-4574**

by e-mail to: **communications@msss.gouv.qc.ca**

by mail to: **Ministère de la Santé et des Services sociaux
Direction des communications
1075, chemin Sainte-Foy, 16^e étage
Québec (Québec)
G1S 2M1**

This document is available in the "**Documentation**" section of the Website of the ministère de la Santé et des Services sociaux, at the following address: **www.msss.gouv.qc.ca**.

Masculine pronouns are used generically in this document.

Legal deposit
Bibliothèque nationale du Québec, 2001
National Library of Canada, 2001

ISBN 2-550-34215-1

Reprint : october 2001

This document may be reproduced in whole or in part as long as the source is given.

© Gouvernement du Québec

Table of contents

WHO IS THIS BROCHURE FOR? 5	
You're not alone...	6
WHAT DOES SEXUAL ORIENTATION MEAN? 7	
WHAT IS YOUR SEXUAL ORIENTATION? 10	
Discover the answer for yourself	10
Acknowledgement and acceptance	13
THE REALITY BEHIND THE MYTHS 15	
Lesbianism is born of desire, not abuse	16
There is more to relations between women than sexuality	17
Female couples do not play sexual roles	18
Lesbian relationships are lasting	18
The lesbian community is diversified	21
TALKING TO THOSE CLOSE TO YOU	
ABOUT YOUR SEXUAL ORIENTATION 22	
A few questions to ask yourself before making a decision	26
Choosing the right moment	28
Anticipating reactions	29
Lesbians from cultural minority communities	32
Lesbian mothers and women living with a male partner	34
YOUR HEALTH AND YOUR WELL-BEING 38	
You feel alone...	39
You're feeling depressed...	40
Alcohol and drug abuse	41
You don't have to put up with violence or discrimination	41
Protecting yourself against STDs and HIV	42
What are you doing to prevent cancer?	43
WHERE TO FIND HELP AND INFORMATION 44	
Your CLSC	44
Community resources	46
Other sources of information	46

Production coordinator

Michel Clermont, ministère de la Santé
et des Services sociaux

Contributors

Irène Demczuk, sociologist
Gilles Savard and Benoit Vigneau,
ministère de la Santé et des Services sociaux

**We wish to thank the following people for their
comments**

Guyline Bérubé,
Conseil du statut de la femme du Québec
Manon Boivin, CLSC Haute-Ville
Micheline Bonneau, Université du Québec
à Rimouski
Michel Dorais, Université Laval
Dr. Marcel Bélanger, Michel Fontaine
et Daniel Rocque, CLSC des Faubourgs
Anne Tremblay, Regroupement des femmes
de la région de Matane
Bill Ryan, McGill Centre for Applied Family Studies,
McGill University

Photograph (cover page)

Valmont Brousseau

Photographs (interior)

Diane Trépanière

Who is this BROCHURE FOR?

You've been doing some soul-searching about your sexual orientation, but you're afraid to confide in your friends and relatives for fear of their reaction. All around you, the norm is heterosexuality. You feel torn between other people's expectations and your own feelings. Just like those who have preceded you in this search for identity, you have many questions but don't know who to talk to.

You live with a woman you love, but you avoid talking about the two of you as a couple to your co-workers because you fear prejudice. You have an appointment with your doctor and you tell him that you have been single for years, thinking that you would get less attentive service if you disclosed your homosexuality. On the other hand, you know that this false information can be detrimental to your health. Basically, you would like to tell the truth but you fear negative reactions.

Another kind of love. You have just found out that your child, your mother or someone close to you is homosexual. You're profoundly shaken by this news because you weren't prepared. It may have caused you worry or pain, or you may even have reacted violently. Since then, you avoid bringing up the subject with this person who is dear to you. If only you could talk about it with someone who wouldn't be judgmental.

You're not alone...

If you're reading this brochure, chances are you're attracted to people of your own sex or are asking yourself questions about your sexual orientation. You may find some answers in these pages. Other answers will come from your meetings with people in health and social services agencies or from talks with community workers. The most important answers will come from yourself. You are not alone, and the difficulties you are facing are not insurmountable.

A great many lesbians are perfectly comfortable with their orientation but they do occasionally encounter difficulties. Among other things, this brochure is intended to help you become better informed about various health problems, which may concern you.



Scientific studies on sexual orientation in North America have shown that fully 8% of the female population and 10% of the male population may have a homosexual orientation. Moreover, some people may go through homosexual experiences at a given time in their life without being homosexual. Exploring and experimenting do not define a person's sexual orientation; they may, however, help them discover their feelings.

Some research has also shown that exclusive homosexuality and heterosexuality are in reality two poles of human sexuality, with bisexuality in between. This means that bisexual individuals are attracted to both sexes, usually with a marked preference for one or the other. In the course of her life, a bisexual woman may at one time be in a loving relationship with a woman and at another with a man. It is estimated that there are more bisexual than homosexual individuals.

SEXUAL ORIENTATION IS DEFINED BY THE SEX OF INDIVIDUALS FOR WHOM WE FEEL AN ATTRACTION AND AFFECTION, BOTH PHYSICAL AND EMOTIONAL. IT IS PART OF OUR PERSONAL IDENTITY IN THAT IT IS HOW WE PERCEIVE OURSELVES AND HOW OTHERS PERCEIVE US.¹

¹ According to Brian Huskins, *Sexual Identity - The Journey Begins*, Regional Health Association of Calgary, Health Canada, May 1998.

Whatever the exact figure, this means there are tens of thousands of women and men in Quebec who experience feelings of love for someone of their own sex. All of us, regardless of our sexual orientation, rub shoulders with homosexuals in everyday life without being aware of it most of the time. That's because sexual orientation is not a discernible characteristic even though some people choose to identify themselves. For the most part, lesbians and bisexual women are not a highly visible minority. They come from all ethnic groups, all regions of Quebec, belong to all age categories and are found in all occupations.

**YOU ALONE KNOW WHETHER YOU ARE
COMFORTABLE WITH THE WAY YOU LIVE.
TRUST YOUR FEELINGS.**

**Discover
the answer
for yourself**

There is no particular age at which a person discovers an attraction to people of the same sex. Some women become aware of it at a very early age while others only do so when they're adults.

Many lesbians have said that the first hint they had of their sexual orientation was a feeling of intense affection for a best friend during adolescence. Others reported feeling different because they weren't attracted to boys. To a certain degree, this feeling of «difference» can translate into being attracted to women or fantasizing about them. A secret curiosity about homosexuality can also be a sign.

Some women have enjoyed a loving relationship with another woman that did not include sex. Others have had a homosexual experience before entering into a loving relationship. Perhaps you have had similar experiences. These feelings of attraction or affection that you may have had can sometimes be confusing. You don't have to have had a sexual experience to know you're a lesbian. You have all the time in the world to decide your sexual orientation for yourself. The important thing to remember is to feel comfortable with whatever you experience.

ONLY YOU KNOW WHAT YOU REALLY ARE.

DISCOVER



**INTERNALIZED HOMOPHOBIA: AN OBSTACLE
TO YOUR HEALTH AND WELL-BEING.**

ACCEPTANCE

The period during which you become aware of your attraction to women or your bisexuality may be marked by ambivalence. One day, some event in your life gives you undeniable proof that you're attracted to people of your own sex. Yet, the next day you're convinced otherwise. This is part of the process of becoming aware of your sexual orientation and accepting it. At this stage of your life, the best attitude to adopt is to look after yourself, understand your feelings and learn to trust them.

Acknowledgement and acceptance

You are most likely confused because of the contradiction

between your feelings toward women and the negative things you have heard about homosexuality. You don't know what to think any more – that's normal. Often, all we know of homosexuality are the stereotypes that circulate around us. This may result in fear and disparagement. Because of the negative perceptions surrounding you, you may have difficulty accepting your sexual orientation.

At first, fear, denial or refusal are feelings that are shared by the majority of homosexuals when they start discovering themselves. Some women may even harbour a hatred of their homosexuality because they fear being marginalized or succumbing to their attraction. This is called internalized homophobia. If this is your case, you may have a tendency to devalue homosexuality as an aspect of your personality. You're probably uncomfortable around other homosexuals, or you lead an active heterosexual life in order to hide your true sexual orientation.

Fear of rejection by those around you may also be an obstacle to accepting your sexual orientation. Perhaps you try to behave like the majority of women by constantly watching what you do or say in order to conform. You try as best you can to hide your real feelings by eliminating any suspicion in other people's minds that you're a lesbian. Some women even go so far as to try to bury this part of themselves by focusing all their energies on other areas such as work, studies or sports.

All these behaviours, which are linked to the difficulty of accepting one's homosexuality, have repercussions on health and well-being. Disturbed by their sexual orientation, some women may, for example, suffer from anxiety and depression, drink excessively or abuse drugs. For all these reasons, it is preferable to acknowledge your homosexuality or bisexuality. Preferable for yourself, first of all, but also in order to improve the quality of your relations with others. Many lesbians will tell you how happy they are that they stopped "hiding" from themselves and those close to them. By accepting this fundamental dimension of yourself, your relations with others become more genuine, more real.

The simple fact is this: You are attracted to and feel affection for someone of the same sex. Those feelings and that mutual attraction constitute the same kind of relationships between women and men. This is why it is important to make the distinction between received ideas and the reality of loving relations between women.

GENUINE

You may have heard it said that lesbians or bisexual women are abnormal, sick, immoral, even perverse. These are in fact prejudices against homosexuals that can sometimes lead to homophobia, a manifestation of fear of or unjustified intolerance to people whose sexual orientation is other than heterosexual or who are suspected of not being heterosexual.

There is a tendency to believe that heterosexuality is the only acceptable model of loving relations between human beings. Traditionally, religion, education, television, music, popular psychology and so on have fostered the image of the female-male couple as the only possible model. It is only normal, therefore, that you yourself have assimilated this notion. Although things are changing, we still live in a world where it is taken for granted that all individuals are or should be heterosexual.

Several myths persist about homosexuality and loving relations between people of the same sex. Here are a few facts to help you dispel the myths surrounding reality as experienced by lesbians or bisexual women.

**Lesbianism is
born of desire,
not abuse**

Many people wrongly believe that a woman becomes a lesbian because of an unsatisfactory relation with a man or because of a traumatic experience such as incest, rape or any other form of abuse. Yet the majority of girls who were victim of sexual abuse or violence at the hands of a man do not develop a homosexual orientation. The same holds true for women who report being dissatisfied with their marital life. Lesbianism is not a form of aversion to men. Rather, it is a physical and emotional attraction to women that explains why some women are lesbians.

**THERE IS AS MUCH POTENTIAL FOR HAPPINESS
IN LOVING RELATIONS BETWEEN WOMEN AS
THERE IS IN AMOROUS RELATIONS BETWEEN
WOMEN AND MEN.**

There is more to relations between women than sexuality

Upon learning that a woman is a lesbian, some people tend to think only of the sexual dimension, as if sexuality alone defined personality. Contrary to this belief, lesbians do not necessarily place more importance on sexuality than do heterosexual women. As is the case between women and men, loving relations between women comprise many facets: emotional, social, economic, etc. The sexual aspect of lesbian life should not be overemphasized but rather viewed in its totality and diversity.

As for bisexual women, they are often perceived as being unable to make up their minds about their sexuality or as more sexually active than others. This forces many bisexual women to hide their orientation in order to protect themselves from prejudices. As a result, they sometimes have more difficulty than lesbians in accepting their sexual orientation.

Female couples do not play sexual roles

When thinking about a female couple, many

people wonder which of the two partners plays the role of the woman and which that of the man. The assumption is that the same dynamics prevail in same-sex couples as in heterosexual ones. Nothing could be further from the truth. In fact, there is no division of sexual roles in female couples; on the contrary, domestic tasks are shared in accordance with the individual's aptitudes and inclinations. In most female couples, roles and tasks are shared equally by the two partners, each of whom, in many instances, is economically independent.

Lesbian relationships are lasting

There is a widespread belief that female couples

are less stable than heterosexual couples. Many think that there is greater depth of feeling and sincerity of commitment among heterosexuals than among lesbians. Yet there is no evidence that this is actually the case. There is therefore no reason to establish a distinction when it comes to sincerity in lesbian couples.



Overall, lesbian couples experience the same ups and downs as heterosexual couples. Female partners manage to sustain loving relationships and are capable of making long-term commitments despite society's negative attitudes, which often force them to keep their private lives a secret. This pressure marks a clear distinction between lesbian couples and female-male couples. In our part of the world, and in all spheres of activity (studies, work, recreation), people are encouraged to get married. Not surprisingly, society's general lack of support for same-sex relationships makes it difficult for a lesbian to acknowledge the existence of a partner or talk about her openly.

The lesbian community is diversified

While the lesbian community is no more homogeneous than the heterosexual one, the fact remains that lesbians occasionally like to get together away from society's usually disapproving eyes.

But there is far more to the lesbian community than restaurants and bars. In Quebec, lesbians are active in lobby groups, not to mention student, sports, social and service associations. At present, there are more than a hundred gay and lesbian coalitions in Quebec, many of which can be found in localities other than urban centres.

Some women choose to live in the country while others perceive rural life as an obstacle to their fulfilment and a recipe for isolation. For many, the anonymity of city life is a positive factor.



Regardless of your situation, you are free to decide whether to disclose your sexual orientation or keep it a secret. However, there will probably come a time when you feel the need to talk about it with someone. At that point, it is very important to decide who that person will be, and when and how you will make this disclosure.

DISCLOSING YOUR SEXUAL ORIENTATION IS BOUND TO BE A TURNING POINT IN YOUR LIFE. IT DOESN'T HAPPEN OVERNIGHT. RATHER, IT IS A GRADUAL PROCESS DURING WHICH YOU CONFIDE WHO YOU ARE TO A GROWING CIRCLE OF PEOPLE. THIS IS A WAY TO SHARE YOUR EXPERIENCES WITH OTHERS AND GIVE THEM AN OPPORTUNITY TO GET TO KNOW YOU BETTER AND ACCEPT YOU AS YOU ARE.

You may find it easier and less threatening to talk about your homosexuality to a friend rather than to your family. There's a good chance that your friends will be more accomodating, since they, unlike your family, usually don't expect you to live up to their expectations. It may be that your sexual orientation does not come as a total surprise to all those close to you; some may have already guessed as much. Be that as it may, it is preferable to choose a friend you trust, a person who respects you and is likely to have an open mind about homosexuality or bisexuality.

REMEMBER THAT NO ONE IS FORCING YOU TO DISCLOSE YOUR HOMOSEXUALITY UNDER ANY CIRCUMSTANCES. WHEN YOU'RE READY TO TALK ABOUT IT, USE YOUR BETTER JUDGMENT AS TO WHOM, WHERE, WHEN AND HOW.

There's no way to predict exactly how the person will react. Accepting yourself and opening up to others are part of the process. Some reactions will help you talk about the things you are experiencing, others will surprise you and may be more difficult to deal with. Keep in mind that the initial reaction is rarely definitive. This is why it is important for you to feel ready and relatively comfortable with your sexual orientation before talking about it with someone you trust.

If you feel angry, guilty or fearful, it may be preferable to seek support before you make your disclosure. In this way, you will be able to continue on the path to self-fulfilment without fear of rejection. Useful resources are listed at the end of this brochure.

SUPPORT

A few questions to ask yourself before making a decision

Everybody is different and reactions towards homosexuality may vary.

Family education rarely views homosexuality in a positive light. Your parents, perhaps more than anyone else, cannot imagine that one of their children might be gay or lesbian. The way you approach the subject of your sexual orientation with your parents or someone close to you must be considered very carefully. Before making your decision, ask yourself these questions:

- Are you comfortable with your sexual orientation?
- What made you decide to disclose your sexual orientation to a particular person?
- Are you close to this person? Do you get along well with this person?
- Do you depend on this person financially? Do you live with this person?

- Do you have a friend or support network to help you in this undertaking?
- What kind of reaction do you anticipate from the person you plan to talk to? What are this person's usual reactions to any controversial subject that concerns you? Is this person generally open-minded?
- Do you know enough about homosexuality to be able to answer questions or dispel mistaken notions this person may have on the subject?
- Are you willing to be patient and understanding with this person if the reaction you get is negative or disappoints you?

All these questions will help you assess your situation and decide whether or not you want to disclose your homosexuality. If need be, seek information, help or support.

Choosing the right moment

Choosing the right moment to talk about such an important aspect of yourself is not always easy. Do not, for instance, pick a time when the people you have chosen to open up to are going through a rough period (job loss, illness, divorce or death of someone close). Rather, wait until they can give you their undivided attention. If you decide to meet somewhere, do it in a place where everyone will feel comfortable.

You may also feel the need to have someone along with you. If you have already broached the subject with an understanding sister or brother, for example, you could ask him or her to help you share the news with your parents. Some people choose to do so by letter. Writing may help you express yourself more clearly and without fear of interruption. However, be prepared to answer a series of questions the next time you meet the person.

Anticipating reactions

How will they react? This is the question foremost on your mind.

It has taken you time to feel comfortable with your homosexuality. In the same way, give your parents and those around you enough time to come to terms with your sexual orientation.

Different parents react in different ways to their daughter's homosexuality. All of a sudden, their image of you is changed, sometimes even shattered. Many parents feel guilty. They wonder: Is it our fault? Is it because of the way we brought up our daughter? Should we talk about it with the rest of the family? How do we deal with a possible partner? Their feelings are often ambivalent: they want their child to be happy and, at the same time, they must give up some of their expectations and adjust to a new reality.

The road to accepting a daughter's homosexuality fully and completely may be long and rocky, with periods of doubt and questions. At this stage, they need you to show that you accept their feelings, knowing that they are legitimate. In reality, even though homosexuality is talked about more and more openly, you must remember that few parents or families are prepared to face such a situation spontaneously and calmly, especially when it concerns their daughter or someone they love. Your parents will most probably need to be reassured. They, in turn, will then be able to find support to go through this difficult period in their life.

YOUR CHILD, YOUR PARENTS AND YOUR LOVED ONES MUST, IN TURN, TAKE THE ROAD TO ACCEPTANCE. DO NOT RUSH THINGS ALONG. IN GOOD TIME, LISTENING AND TALKING WILL MAKE IT POSSIBLE FOR THEM TO UNDERSTAND AND ACCEPT.

Lesbians from cultural minority communities

If you belong to an aboriginal

community or have a different ethnic background than the majority, the disclosure of your sexual orientation to those around you may give rise to a different set of questions.

In many cultures and cultural communities, homosexuality is taboo. It is often associated with the values of the host society and may be interpreted as an example of Western society's decadence. In this context, a lesbian is viewed as turning her back on her community's cultural values, family traditions and religious beliefs. This is particularly true for communities that place a fundamental value on marriage, traditional female and male roles, and the family.

Thus, instead of being perceived as affirmative, the disclosure of your sexual orientation may be interpreted as a form of rejection of parental authority and tradition. This is why it is important to dispel the myths surrounding homosexuality and engage in dialogue with those around you. Despite the difficulties, many lesbians and bisexual women have remained on good terms with their family following the disclosure of their homosexuality.

In large cities, lesbians of various cultural backgrounds have access to support groups.

WE ALL NEED TO BE LOVED BY THOSE CLOSE TO US, AND RECOGNIZED FOR WHO WE ARE. FEAR OF REJECTION LEADS MANY WOMEN FROM VARIOUS CULTURAL COMMUNITIES TO LIVE SECRET LIVES AS LESBIANS. YET, AS WITH ANY SOCIAL DIFFERENCE, ACCEPTING HOMOSEXUALITY IS A SOURCE OF ENRICHMENT FOR ALL HUMAN COMMUNITIES.

Lesbian mothers and women living with a male partner

There is no particular age at which a person recognizes or discovers an attraction to someone of the same sex. It can happen to a woman living

with a male partner or a mother. Accepting this new sexual orientation in adult age is often more unsettling, particularly if the marital relation dates back several years. For the male partner and children, this change may also be dramatic and cause feelings of insecurity. No family is prepared for such a revelation. It is normal, therefore, for the members of your family to feel completely at a loss. Lack of understanding, bewilderment, sadness, anger and a strong feeling of betrayal are emotions frequently experienced by the spouse and the children.

The decision whether or not to disclose your homosexuality depends on a host of factors such as how comfortable you are with your sexual orientation, the reaction you anticipate from your spouse, the age of your children and their open-mindedness about homosexuality. The way you go about it will influence the subsequent course of events. It may not be appropriate to talk about your sexual orientation to your spouse or your children if you do not feel ready for it and comfortable with it.

BEING PREPARED AND HAVING THE SUPPORT OF SOMEONE OUTSIDE YOUR FAMILY CIRCLE IS NO GUARANTEE OF SHELTER AGAINST PAINFUL REACTIONS FROM YOUR LOVED ONES BUT THEY WILL OFTEN HELP YOU AVERT THE WORST SCENARIOS.

If you are a mother, add the following questions to your list before disclosing your sexual orientation to your children:

- How do you anticipate each of your children will react?
Is the reaction likely to be similar in each case?
How will you deal with these reactions?
- Will you be able to reassure each of your children that there is no reason to feel your relationship with them will be threatened because you are homosexual?
- Are you willing to be open-minded, patient and understanding with each of your children if you get a negative reaction?
- How, when and in what context will you introduce them to the woman you love?
- Do you have friends, relatives or a support network to help you take this important step and offer assistance to your children?



THIS WILL PROBABLY BE A DIFFICULT PERIOD FOR YOU TO GO THROUGH, BUT ONCE YOU HAVE REVEALED YOUR SEXUAL ORIENTATION TO YOUR FAMILY AND LOVED ONES, YOU WILL FIND LIFE EASIER, BE ABLE TO FIND FULFILMENT AND START BUILDING A NETWORK OF PEOPLE WHO SHARE YOUR SITUATION.

More and more lesbian mothers who want legal custody of their children obtain it. Unfortunately, prejudices often prevail when it comes to the well-being and personal development of children with a homosexual parent. Beyond these prejudices and myths, many studies have shown that homosexuals have the same parental skills as heterosexuals, and that they are just as concerned with the well-being of their children. Moreover, children with a homosexual parent are no more likely to become homosexual than children of heterosexual parents. Contrary to what many people think, such children are no more exposed to sexual abuse within the family. As for the risk of rejection, children set up self-protection mechanisms just as is the case in any other marginalized group. They are not alone in facing this reality, and the homosexual parent plays an important supportive role.

Once the initial shock has worn off, many families end up accepting this reality and continue to have harmonious relationships, as is often the case after a divorce. There are associations of lesbian mothers to guide you and help you break the isolation.

LIVING

**TO ACCEPT THAT YOU ARE A LESBIAN
IS TO MAKE A POSITIVE CHANGE IN YOUR
WELL-BEING AND HEALTH.**

Your health and
YOUR WELL-BEING

Of course, whether you're a lesbian or a bisexual woman, you're also a woman like any other. However, feeling socially marginalized or excluded can have negative effects on your health and well-being. Few people can claim to feel comfortable with themselves when rejected by the people around them. This fear of being judged generally leads many lesbians to consult their doctors less often than heterosexual women, and it is estimated that most lesbian or bisexual women keep their sexual orientation a secret from their doctor. These behaviours only make it more difficult to prevent certain diseases and, as a result, are detrimental to your well-being. It is important to choose a healthcare professional who is open to the diversity of sexual orientations and with whom you can establish a trusting relationship. Remember that anything you say to a healthcare professional or social worker remains confidential.

**You feel
alone...**

It's not easy as a lesbian to establish relations with other people. Whether you live in a large city or a small town, you may have a painful sense of isolation. You may feel that heterosexuals around you will not understand if you tell them you are a lesbian. The temptation to avoid social contact may become hard to resist.

Many lesbians will tell you that they went through periods of loneliness before they accepted their sexual orientation, and that isolation can be overcome. There are groups throughout Quebec that organize not only meetings but also recreational activities in order to break the isolation. In addition, all cities have informal networks of lesbians who meet in cafes, restaurants and other places.

You are not alone—there are thousands of lesbians like you in Quebec. By meeting other women like you and by learning more about their experiences, you will find it easier to open up to the people around you.

SUPPORT

You're feeling depressed...

Being part of a minority group can be rough. In fact, you are often more prone to feeling a particular kind of stress that can affect your daily life. Depending on your situation, you respond by distancing yourself: you've been single for so long and it's weighing on you; you're going through a break up and it's tearing you apart; you're looking for a reason to live. If any of these situations applies to you and you're feeling depressed or are contemplating suicide, it's very important to talk with someone about your situation at a gay help line or to seek professional help from someone working in a CLSC or a private practice.

Talking helps. Within your reach there is some agency or somebody that understands you and can help you regain your will to live, to love and be loved.

Alcohol and drug abuse

Bars are one of lesbians' favourite places to get-together. Inevitably, going to bars on a regular basis means drinking alcohol, and the line between drinking regularly and alcoholism is very thin. Some lesbians also abuse drugs or alcohol to blunt the feeling of being different, alleviate painful emotions or lower their inhibitions.

If you feel you have a drug or alcohol problem, there are resources you can turn to. Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) and Narcotics Anonymous (NA) have set up support groups that can help you in your resolve to stay sober. In some places, Montreal and Quebec City among them, you will find gay and lesbian AA and NA groups. These groups offer a supportive environment in which you will feel safe and be able to share experiences. There are also detox centres, as well as counsellors working in CLSCs and private practices who specialize in alcoholism and drug addiction. Many of them are specially trained to provide lesbians with assistance.

You don't have to put up with violence or discrimination

Despite the fact that the Quebec Charter of Human Rights and Freedoms prohibits discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation, discriminatory attitudes and violence against homosexuals persist in our society. If you feel you are a victim of discrimination or violence, go to the Commission des droits de la personne et de la jeunesse du Québec. There, your complaints about job discrimination or housing access will be heard.

If you have been attacked or injured in the street, file a police report. Many police officers in Quebec have received special sensitivity training in this area. On the other hand, violence in lesbian couples is a reality that can take many forms ranging from insults, contempt and threats to physical violence. All these manifestations of abuse undermine confidence and self-esteem. You don't have to put up with them on the part of your partner. Help is available.

Protecting yourself against STDs and HIV

It is true that sexual relations between

women carry less risk of HIV or STD infection. But, what do you know of your partner's sexual history? This is why it's important to protect yourself properly and to talk.

The risk factors are those that involve potential contact between vaginal secretions and menstrual blood with a partner's mucous membranes. Women who have sexual relations with men, whether they are lesbian or bisexual, should make sure their partners use a condom or practice safe sex. Safe sex does not have to mean abstinence. On the contrary, it can ease your mind about the fear of contracting an STD or HIV. Many leaflets and brochures dealing with safe sex are available at your CLSC, as well as in medical clinics and from community groups.

What are you doing to prevent cancer?

Lesbians are at greater risk of contracting cervical cancer because they see their doctors less frequently for preventive reasons. In general, lesbians irregularly have a PAP smear done, a cytology test that helps detect cervical cancer and which is usually conducted at the time of a gynecological exam. It is important to see your doctor regularly to have the cancer-screening test administered.

The incidence of breast cancer is also higher among lesbians for similar reasons. Lesbians tend to seek medical consultation less often either because they fear caregivers' attitudes to their sexual orientation or because they suppose they don't need regular gynecological exams because they don't normally use contraceptives.

Once again, it is important to develop a relationship of trust with your doctor and to ensure you're being screened for cervical or breast cancer.



Where to find help **AND INFORMATION?**

Your CLSC

All the services offered by CLSCs are available to lesbians and bisexual women. **You can also contact Info-santé CLSC at any time, the telephone number is the same as for your local CLSC.**

Your CLSC can help you better understand and accept your sexual orientation or that of someone close to you. It can also refer you to the resources available in your locality. Do not hesitate to contact it.

A great many caregivers, working mostly in CLSCs and throughout the health and social services network, are trained to provide effective assistance to lesbians and bisexual women with the problems they may encounter.

If you are dissatisfied with the services offered, no matter where, mechanisms whereby you can express your views are available. If you consider it necessary, file a complaint; in doing so, you will help improve the services that are offered.

Community resources

There are community resources specially intended for lesbians and bisexual women in most regions of Quebec. Among these highly diversified resources you will find support groups for young lesbians, parents of lesbians, lesbian mothers, lesbians from cultural minorities, lesbians with disabilities, people who are HIV-positive or have AIDS, and victims of domestic or homophobic violence. Do not hesitate to make use of these resources.

Help lines are also available. The best known is GAY LINE, (free, confidential, anonymous). In Greater Montreal, GAY LINE can be reached at (514) 866-5090; elsewhere in Quebec the number is 1 888 505-1010 (toll-free). This service can also refer you to other resources in your area that will be able to listen to your needs and respond to them accordingly.

Other sources of information

Other sources of information on lesbian and bisexual realities are available as well. If you feel the need to learn more about homosexuality, information can be obtained from the following sources:

- the Internet
- specialized books (in bookshops or libraries)
- magazines and newspapers usually found in bars and organizations or businesses catering to gays and lesbians

Some additional resources

- INFO-SANTÉ CLSC
 - Same number as your local CLSC
- THE CLSC IN YOUR AREA
- GAY LINE (GAYS AND LESBIANS)
 - Greater Montreal area: **(514) 866-5090**
 - Elsewhere in Quebec: **1 888 505-1010**
- DIRE ENFIN LA VIOLENCE **(514) 528-5854**
- GROUPE D'INTERVENTION EN VIOLENCE CONJUGALE CHEZ LES LESBIENNES (GIVCL) **(514) 526-2452**
- DRUGS: HELP AND REFERRAL
 - Greater Montreal area: **(514) 527-2626**
 - Elsewhere in Quebec: **1 800 265-2626**

On peut également se procurer cette brochure en français sous le titre
Bien vivre son orientation sexuelle – Les femmes et l’homosexualité.

Also available: Feeling Comfortable with your Sexual Orientation:
Men and Homosexuality.