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Services & Advocacy
for Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual
& Transgender Elders

National Resource Center
on LGBT Aging
National Headquarters
c/o Services & Advocacy
for GLBT Elders (SAGE)
305 Seventh Avenue
6th Floor
New York, NY 10001

212-741-2247 phone
212-366-1947 fax

info@lgbtagingcenter.org
lgbtagingcenter.org

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Many people would agree that there is not a lot of understanding of bisexuality and bisexual people... even though we compose 50 percent of the LGBT community. Why is it that the aging bisexual community is one of the least represented groups within our LGBT aging network? Let's explore some reasons why this might be the case.

Bisexuality Defined

I regularly encounter folks who challenge the very existence and meaning of bisexuality. What does it mean to be bisexual? One popular definition is from bisexual activist Robyn Ochs, "Bisexuals are people who acknowledge in themselves the potential to be attracted romantically, emotionally, and/or sexually—to people of more than one gender, not necessarily at the same time, not necessarily in the same way, and not necessarily to the same degree."

Where are the bisexual elders?

Although elders with a bisexual identity are not uncommon, they are considerably more closeted than their gay or lesbian peers, and therefore, rarely seen. Lesbian and gay people tend to believe that bisexual folks are hiding in the heterosexual world, while heterosexuals assume bisexual people are part of the gay and lesbian community. Bisexual people are sometimes assumed to be straight or gay based on the gender of the person they are currently dating. For example, two women might spend time in lesbian community spaces. Perhaps one of the women is bisexual and objects to the assumption that she is a lesbian (i.e., when others call the two women a "lesbian couple"). However, every time she mentions her bisexual identity, others insist that she can't really be bisexual or that her orientation doesn't matter or believing other myths.

Research, media and the arts underrepresent bisexuals (young and old). For the most part, we are merged into the discussions of gay and lesbian aging. Issues confronting older lesbian and gay men do overlap with the experiences of older people who are bisexual, but only partially. The pervasive invisibility of bisexuality has given us few or no role models, let alone an identity for who we are. It is important to keep in mind that all aging service providers engage with bisexual elders, even if they don't realize it.

Myths Abound

Bisexual elders have needs similar to those of their lesbian and gay peers, such as affordable housing, health care, caregiving, and end of life planning. However, in addition to experiencing discrimination from both the gay and lesbian community and the heterosexual community, bisexual elders face numerous myths that make their aging needs unique. To support bisexual seniors, we must learn to recognize and resist common misconceptions about bisexuality.

Myth: Being a bisexual person means being unfaithful to your partner.

Fact: A person's decision to be monogamous with a partner is an individual choice influenced by many things involved in a relationship and in that person's personality.

Myth: There is no such thing as bisexual person. You're either gay/lesbian or straight, no in between.

Fact: It is this attitude that all things fall into extremes or binaries that keep many people from acknowledging and learning about bisexuality.

Myth: To be bisexual, you have to love genders equally.

Fact: There is no defined cut off point at which one must cease to identify as bisexual and must identify as gay/lesbian or straight because of a shift in attractions.

Myth: Bisexual people are more accepted by straight society.

Fact: To pass for straight and deny your bisexuality is just as painful and damaging for a bisexual person as it is for a gay person to have to deny their identity.

Myth: Bisexual individuals are confused about their sexuality. They can't have it both ways... they have to make a choice.

Fact: This is quite possibly the hardest myth to dispel because many people do transition from identifying as straight to identifying as gay or lesbian (and vice versa) and use the label bisexual as an aid in their transition. Many bisexual older adults come out at least twice, first as lesbian or gay, and a second time as bisexual.

Being an Ally

With so few out bisexual elders, we all have to do as much as we can to find allies, educate others, fight bisexual oppression and support those bisexual older adults who are less able to be out. Here are a few tips on how to be an ally and advocate for bisexual individuals:



- ✓ Celebrate Bisexuality Day on September 23 and Bisexual Health Awareness Month every March
- ✓ Validate the existence of bisexual people by being inclusive and establishing programs/supports specifically for bisexual people
- ✓ Do not use gay as an umbrella term, as this can erase bisexual people. For example, say “same-sex marriage” rather than “gay marriage”
- ✓ Display signs or symbols that welcome people who are bisexual (i.e., the bisexual flag, bisexual symbol pins/buttons)
- ✓ Make materials/information available that highlight bisexuality
- ✓ Seek self-education and training – webinars, books, research articles, conversations with bisexual elders and allies

Resources

American Institute for Bisexuality www.bisexual.org

Bisexual Resource Center www.biresource.org

BiNet USA www.binetusa.org

Movement Advancement Project
www.lgbtmap.org/policy-and-issue-analysis/bisexual-people

National Resource Center on LGBT Aging www.lgbtagingcenter.org/resources

By Terri Clark, SAGECare Certified Trainer