

‘Questions & Answers’ – BOOKLET

Part – 1: Q&A no. 1 to 4

What is sexuality?

An “official” definition:

“Sexuality is a central aspect of being human throughout life and encompasses sex, gender identities and roles [the different feelings and roles attached to being male or female], sexual orientation, eroticism, pleasure, intimacy and reproduction. Sexuality is experienced and expressed in thoughts, fantasies, desires, beliefs, attitudes, values, behaviours, practices, roles and relationships. While sexuality can include all of these dimensions, not all of them are always experienced or expressed. Sexuality is influenced by the interaction of biological, psychological, social, economic, political, cultural, ethical, legal, historical and religious and spiritual factors.” [Source: WHO-Expert Consultation – Draft working definition, October 2002.]

Some important things to remember are:

- Sexuality is part of being human, i.e., all human beings, of all ages, are sexual beings.
- Issues related to sexuality may assume greater or lesser importance in different phases of our lives.
- Sexuality is not equal, or limited to, sexual intercourse – the physical act of sex. Sexual intercourse is only one manifestation of sexuality.
- How and what a person thinks about sexuality is influenced by his or her culture, religious beliefs, personal background, and experiences. However, it is important to acknowledge that the way one person thinks may not be the only way to think about sexuality. What is important is to be respectful of people’s differing beliefs and choices and to encourage behaviours and practices that promote the sexual health and overall well-being of all people.

What is sexual development?

Sexual development is a complex matter. Sexuality and sexual behaviour are present during the entire developmental process from childhood up to adulthood. For example, a four-year old child is already aware of its sexual identity. A child of six starts to know what behaviour his or her culture considers appropriate or not for a boy or a girl. Young children are often interested in discovering their own bodies and experimenting with ‘sexual’ behaviour in their play with peers.

As children become adolescents, i.e., begin to move towards adulthood, big changes happen in their bodies and their sexual development. They begin to feel sexual attraction towards others and may express this attraction in sexual acts. They develop the physical, psycho-social and emotional capacities for reproduction and pleasure. They also learn about intimacy by interactions with partners and peers.

When a young person is sexually attracted towards someone, this attraction may be mental (involving thoughts, fantasies, dreams) and/or physical (sexual arousal). S/he may express this attraction through non-verbal behaviour such as touching, facial expression, tone of voice, distance, posture, rate of speech, and physical clumsiness or errors in speech (due to embarrassment or anxiety).

Learning to understand bodily changes and how reproduction occurs is one thing. But more important is adjusting to erotic feelings and experiences, learning about societal standards and practices regarding sexual expression, and making decisions about different kinds of relationships, different degrees of intimacy and one's identity and roles. Developing a healthy sexuality involves the integration of all these areas, combining personal, interpersonal and societal aspects.

When children engage in homosexual activities, does this mean that they will become homosexuals?

No, same-sex behaviour in teenagers and adolescents (boy-boy or girl-girl) does not necessarily lead to a homosexual or bisexual identity. Same-sex behaviour is a normal part of experimenting by teenagers and is seen in all cultures. It may well be innocent play and may sometimes be provoked by situations in which there are no persons of the opposite sex around, like in a shelter for street children, boarding schools or in jails, but also in societies where a strict segregation of sexes exists. Same-sex behaviour and attraction can be temporary and change over time. Only if people find out that their sexual attraction to the same sex is a fixed, deep-rooted pattern and seems not to be transitional, they may have a dominant lesbian, gay or bisexual orientation. Even then, however, many homo- and bisexual people may prefer not to identify as gay, lesbian or bisexual and lead a double life, in particular in cultures where the existence of homosexuality is not acknowledged, or is rejected or seen as criminal activity.

How do people become homosexual?

This is a question that is often asked. Up till now, however, a simple, single basis for a person's heterosexuality, homosexuality, lesbianism or bisexuality cannot be pointed out. There is some evidence that homosexuality might have some biological correlates (just like people may be born with different intelligences or eye colours) and may be something which people "are just born with." However, biological explanations seem to be insufficient to explain the range and diversity in human sexual behaviours.

A generally agreed position nowadays is that several factors contribute to a person's sexual orientation, including biological factors. Therefore, it is difficult to talk about the 'causes' of homosexuality. It is unlikely that a single factor will ever be found, which determines sexual orientation. We do know, however, that gay men, bisexuals and lesbian women usually feel

their same-sex attraction as something which is very strong, which they cannot escape or deny.

But another important question that we need to ask is: why is it so important to know what causes homosexuality? Nobody ever seems to wonder about what causes heterosexuality, even though the factors are probably similar to the ones for homosexuality, including the need to love and be loved, and have intimate relationships. No matter what causes homosexuality, people have the right to shape their own life and should not be condemned for what they are, and this general principle applies to sexual orientation too.

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