

Sexual Identity: The Cass Model

Most LGBT people go through a complicated process of identity development and coming to terms with who they are. The following model developed by Vivienne Cass describes a process from identity confusion, to comparison, then tolerance, acceptance, pride and finally identity synthesis. From tolerance to synthesis, the process involves increasingly seeking social contact with and an increasing commitment to the lesbian and gay community. Identity synthesis recreates connections with the wider community.

While this model was developed with lesbian and gay people, the process may be similar for bisexual and transgender people. It is important to keep in mind that not all LGBT individuals go through all the stages, that they may not do it in order, and that they may not clearly fit in any one stage at a particular time.

1. **Identity Confusion:** "Could I be gay?" Person is beginning to wonder if "homosexuality" is personally relevant. Denial and confusion is experienced.

Task: Who am I? - Accept, Deny, Reject.

Possible Responses: Will avoid information about lesbians and gays; inhibit behaviour; deny homosexuality ("experimenting," "an accident," "just drunk").

Males: May keep emotional involvement separate from sexual contact;

Females: May have deep relationships that are non-sexual, though strongly emotional.

Possible Needs: May explore internal positive and negative judgments. Will be permitted to be uncertain regarding sexual identity. May find support in knowing that sexual behaviour occurs along a spectrum. May receive permission and encouragement to explore sexual identity as a normal experience (like career identity, and social identity).

2. **Identity Comparison:** "Maybe this does apply to me." Will accept the possibility that she or he may be gay. Self-alienation becomes isolation.

Task: Deal with social alienation.

Possible Responses: May begin to grieve for losses and the things she or he will give up by embracing their sexual orientation. May compartmentalise their own sexuality. Accepts lesbian, gay definition of behaviour but maintains "heterosexual" identity of self. Tells oneself "It's only temporary", "I'm just in love with this particular woman/man" etc.

Possible Needs: Will be very important that the person develops own definitions. Will need information about sexual identity, lesbian and gay community resources, encouragement to talk about loss of heterosexual life expectations. May be permitted to keep some "heterosexual" identity (it is not an all or none issue).

3. **Identity Tolerance:** "I'm not the only one." Accepts the probability of being homosexual and recognises sexual, social, emotional needs that go with being lesbian and gay. Increased commitment to being lesbian or gay.

Task: Decrease social alienation by seeking out other homosexual people.

Possible Responses: Beginning to have language to talk and think about the issue. Recognition that being lesbian or gay does not preclude other options. Accentuates difference between self and heterosexuals. Seeks out lesbian and gay culture (positive

contact leads to more positive sense of self, negative contact leads to devaluation of the culture, stops growth). May try out variety of stereotypical roles.

Possible Needs: Be supported in exploring own shame feelings derived from heterosexism, as well as external heterosexism. Receive support in finding positive lesbian and gay community connections. It is particularly important for the person to know community resources.

4. **Identity Acceptance:** "I will be okay." Accepts, rather than tolerates, gay or lesbian self-image. There is continuing and increased contact with the gay and lesbian culture.

Task: Deal with inner tension of no longer subscribing to society's norm, attempt to bring congruence between private and public view of self.

Possible Responses: Accepts gay or lesbian self identification. May compartmentalise "gay life." Maintains less and less contact with heterosexual community. Attempts to "fit in" and "not make waves" within the gay and lesbian community. Begins some selective disclosures of sexual identity. More social coming out; more comfortable being seen with groups of men or women that are identified as "gay." More realistic evaluation of situation.

Possible Needs: Continue exploring grief and loss of heterosexual life expectations. Continue exploring internalised "homophobia" (learned shame for heterosexist society). Find support in making decisions about where, when, and to whom he or she self discloses.

5. **Identity Pride:** "I've got to let people know who I am!" Immerses self in gay and lesbian culture. Less and less involvement with heterosexual community. Us-them quality to political/social viewpoint.

Task: Deal with incongruent views of heterosexuals.

Possible Responses: Splits world into "gay" (good) and "straight" (bad). Experiences disclosure crises with heterosexuals as he or she is less willing to "blend in." Identifies gay culture as sole source of support; all gay friends, business connections, social connections.

Possible Needs: Receive support for exploring anger issues. Find support for exploring issues of heterosexism. Develop skills for coping with reactions and responses to disclosure of sexual identity. Resist being defensive!

6. **Identity Synthesis:** Develops holistic view of self. Defines self in a more complete fashion, not just in terms of sexual orientation.

Task: Integrate gay and lesbian identity so that instead of being the identity, it is an aspect of self.

Possible Responses: Continues to be angry at heterosexism, but with decreased intensity. Allows trust of others to increase and build. Gay and lesbian identity is integrated with all aspects of "self." Feels all right to move out into the community and not simply define space according to sexual orientation.

Adapted from: Cass, V. Homosexual Identity Development, 1979. Adopted by Susan Young, SIUC, 1995