

THE **TREVOR** PROJECT
Saving Young LGBTQ Lives



COMING OUT

*A Handbook
for LGBTQ
Young People*



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Exploring your sexual orientation and/or gender identity can bring up a lot of feelings and questions. Inside this handbook, we will work together to explore your identity, what it might be like to share your identity with others, and provide you with tools and guiding questions to help you think about what coming out means to you.

The Trevor Project's **Coming Out: A Handbook for LGBTQ Young People** is here to help you navigate questions around your identity. You know yourself and what works for you better than anyone else. Each of us has the right to share or not share different aspects of ourselves with others. No one else is entitled to information around your identities, if you do not want them to know. If you choose not to share parts of your identity with others, it does not make you any less valid than those who may choose to share their identities with other people.

“I’ve slowly been figuring out who I really am, and every step of the way I like who I find more and more.”

—Hayley, 16 (Virginia)

You may have heard people talking about “coming out” before in ways that are oversimplified, judgmental, or just plain scary. The truth is that there is no one way to “come out” or be “out.” There may be certain people in our lives with whom we want to share our sexual orientation and/or gender identity, and there may be others with whom we know that we do not feel comfortable or safe sharing. This is more than okay!

Some people may share their identity with a few trusted friends online, some may choose to share with a counselor or a trusted family member, and others may want everyone in their life to know about their identity. An important thing to know is that for a lot of people, coming out doesn't just happen once. A lot of folks find themselves coming out at different times to different people.

It is all about what works for you, wherever you are at. The things you hear about coming out may make you feel pressured to take steps that don't feel right for you, or that you don't feel prepared for. Your experience is truly unique to you. You get to decide. This handbook is here to help you think through what might be best for you.

After thinking it through, you may decide to be out to yourself, but not to anyone else — and that's okay. Many people choose not to come out to others for different reasons. You are valid and deserve support no matter who you do or do not share your identities with. This resource is for you to explore how you feel and what choices are right and safe for you.



IDENTITY

Gender identity and sexual orientation can be significant parts of who we are. And for many of us, there are lots of other aspects of ourselves that are meaningful and help make us the people we are. All of these identities help shape us into ourselves. Race, ethnicity, (dis)ability, national origin, the language(s) we speak, age, social class, religion/spirituality, and many other identity categories help us tell a larger picture about what it means to be us. Gender identity and sexual orientation can be just one piece of the puzzle. We are all complex human beings, and that is wonderful!

THE BASICS

Questioning your identity is an experience that lots of people have many times throughout their life. Identity is complicated and if you aren't sure how you identify, that's ok! You are allowed to not have everything figured out right at this moment. Taking some time to think through how you feel can be helpful in better understanding your gender identity, gender expression, and/or sexual orientation.

Many people aren't sure of the difference between gender identity, gender expression, sex assigned at birth, and sexual orientation. It isn't something many of us are taught. Instead, lots of us end up figuring out what these categories mean on our own. Let's spend some time breaking down the difference between each of these terms and exploring what they mean together.



What Is Sex Assigned at Birth?

When we are born, doctors decide whether “female” or “male” will be listed on our birth certificate. This is often one of the first instances when gender is ascribed to us. This sex assignment at birth is typically based solely on one’s genitals. Just like a lot of the concepts in this handbook, sex assignment at birth is far more intricate than meets the eye.

The label of one’s sex assignment at birth is often attributed to a child before they can speak, walk, or know for themselves what their gender identity is. As such, sex assignment does not take into account one’s true gender identity. Your true gender may be different than the gender that a doctor assigned you, which is perfectly normal, valid, and wonderful.

Additionally, there is so much diversity between bodies. For some babies, their bodies do not fit neatly into the category of “male” or “female.” These people may come to identify themselves as intersex, which is a term used for “a variety of conditions in which a person is born with a reproductive or sexual anatomy that doesn’t seem to fit the typical definitions of female or male” (Intersex Society of North America).

It is not always an easy process to figure out what your sex assignment at birth and your gender mean to you, so we want to take a moment to recognize all that it took to discover who you are.

What Is Gender?

Some people say that gender looks like this:



Others say that gender is this:



In actuality, gender often looks a lot like this:



Now, let's zoom in!

Gender Identity

Gender Identity describes our internal understanding and experience of our own gender. Each person's experience with their gender identity is unique and personal.

Some people think that there are only two gender identities possible: boy or girl. But, in fact, thousands and thousands of people experience their gender outside of this gender binary (*binary meaning made up of two things*). Some people identify as being both a boy and a girl, or being neither a boy nor a girl. Some folks identify as a gender that is different than boy or girl, or they don't experience gender at all. Non-binary is a term that refers to people who don't experience their gender(s) as completely a girl/woman or boy/man.

Think of how many different ways there are to be a boy or a girl; there are millions of different ways to be non-binary too. Throughout the course of history and all around the world, there have always been people who experience their gender(s) in diverse ways.

While many people identify with the sex they were assigned at birth, some people may find that their gender identity differs from the sex they were assigned at birth. Exploring your gender is normal at all ages and at any stage of life. All of these experiences are equally valid.

How do I experience my gender?

How do I feel in relation to the sex I was assigned at birth?

What does gender mean to me?

It can be helpful to visualize how you experience gender. Below is a Gender Identity map where you can mark how you identify in terms of gender identity. Maybe you can make a single dot on this graphic, maybe you place yourself using five separate dots, maybe your identity needs a circle around one large area, or more. We give you the freedom to mark the map one way today, and an entirely different way tomorrow, a month, or a year from now. Your identity may shift fluidly or stay the same. All experiences are welcome here!



Gender Expression

Gender Expression describes the way in which we present ourselves, which can include physical appearance, clothing, hairstyles, and behavior.

Gender identity is not the same as gender expression. It is important to not assume that the way that someone moves, talks, dresses, or styles their hair is indicative of how they identify their gender. There are an infinite amount of amazing ways to be a person of any gender. Some boys wear dresses, some girls have short hair, and some non-binary folks wear makeup. Gender expression is all about

how you want to present. If you are not currently able to express your gender the way that you wish you could, we stand with you. You are still you!

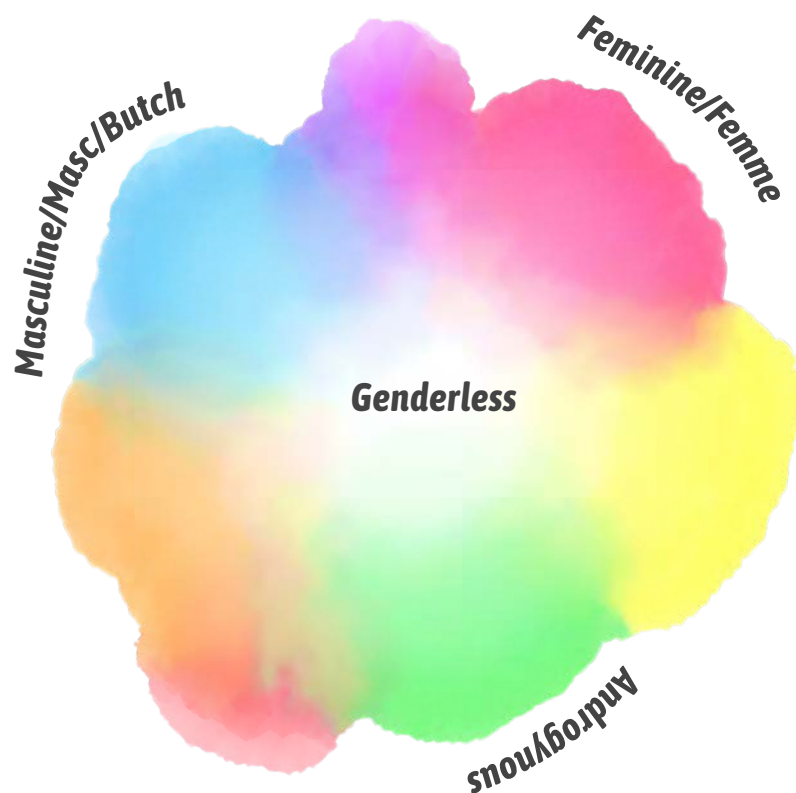
How do I like to present my gender?

In an ideal situation, how would I want to express my gender?

What aspects of gender expression make me feel happy and authentically myself?

What aspects of gender expression make me feel sad and not like myself?

If you like, you can mark on the Gender Expression Map below with how you experience your gender expression. It is always more than okay to allow room for feelings to shift over time. Maybe your gender expression stays mostly in the androgynous part of the map, or maybe it fluctuates between masculine and feminine, or somewhere in between. Maybe you prefer to express yourself in a genderless way. Your map gets to reflect the personal relationship you have with your gender expression.



Transitioning

Some people might go through a process called transitioning. Transitioning can refer to any social, legal, and/or medical steps individuals take to affirm their gender identity or gender expression. Not everyone wants to take some or any of these steps, and that is okay — this doesn't make them any less of who they are. Transitioning for some looks like using a new set of pronouns or wearing different clothing and/or going through the process of changing one's name on legal documents or changing one's gender marker on a driver's license and/or going on hormones or getting surgery to affirm one's gender. Not all people who identify with gender(s) other than the one they were assigned at birth choose to transition. And for those who do, the process can look millions of different ways.

There is no single path to living as your true gender. You get to decide if transitioning is something that is important to you and/or how it looks for your gender, your body, and your life.

What Is Sexual Orientation?

Some people say that sexual orientation is this:



Others say sexual orientation is this:



Just like gender, sexual orientation is more expansive too.



Sexual Orientation

Sexual Orientation includes different forms of attraction, behaviors, and identities. For a long time, many people saw all forms of attraction as the same thing. As language has expanded, more and more people have come to understand that different forms of attraction can be parsed out and talked about as distinct categories.

Sexual, physical, romantic, and emotional attraction are four major ways that people have differentiated forms of desire. While these are the most commonly talked about categories describing attraction, there are other types as well, including mental, sensual, and aesthetic.

In our society, it is often assumed that each person is heterosexual (meaning they only are attracted to people of a different gender). It is also assumed that we all experience sexual/physical, romantic, and emotional attraction as the same thing. While some people find that their sexual orientation matches up with these expectations, some folks do not. It is very normal to find ourselves questioning our sexual orientation. Despite what we may have been taught, attraction can look so many amazing, unique ways. Whether you experience all of the categories of attraction as the same, or feel varying amounts of each, or no attraction at all, there are lots of other people out there feeling the same way. You also might experience attraction towards just one gender, multiple genders, or different genders of people at different times in your life. You are never too young or too old to question your sexual orientation. Your sexual orientation is real and legitimate no matter what.

Let's explore the different types of attraction in more depth below:

Sexual Attraction

Sexual Attraction is typically the first thing that comes to mind when people think about sexual orientation or attraction in general. This type of attraction is characterized by the desire to be sexually intimate with other people. Physical attraction is often considered a piece of sexual attraction. It can be described as who you find physically attractive.

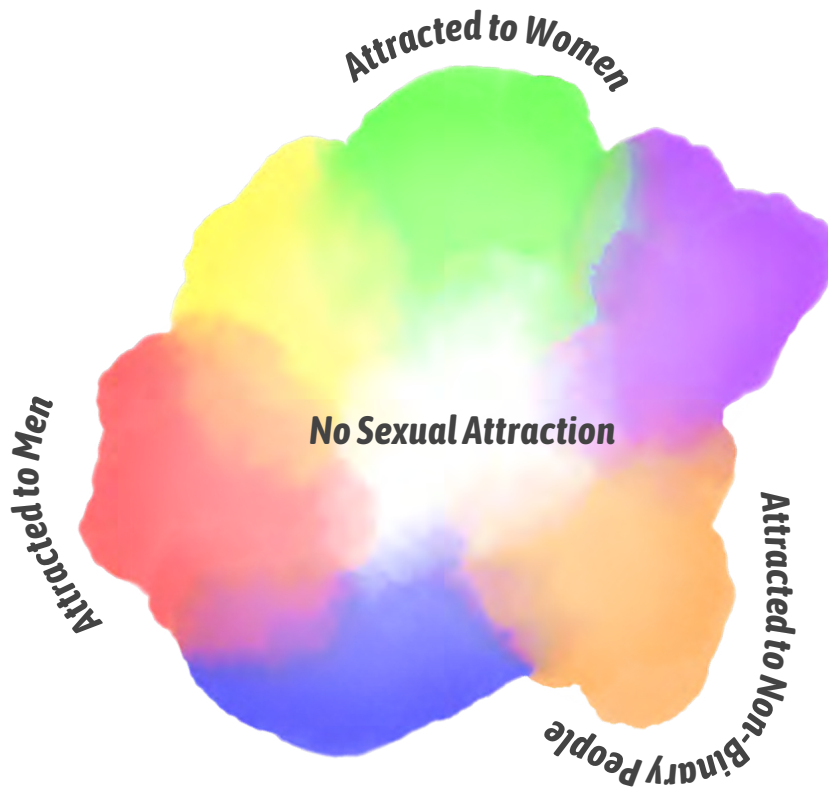
Am I interested in being sexually intimate with others?

Who am I interested in being sexually intimate with?

Who do I find physically attractive?

How often do I experience feelings of sexual/physical attraction?

Feel free to mark below with how you experience sexual/physical attraction. You can use the guiding questions above to get you thinking about where you might land on the map.



Romantic Attraction

Romantic Attraction is often described as the desire for romantic intimacy or romantic relationships with others. For some, this could mean wanting to hold hands, go on dates, kissing and/or cuddling. The list goes on, and it's all about how you personally feel around each of these expressions of romance.

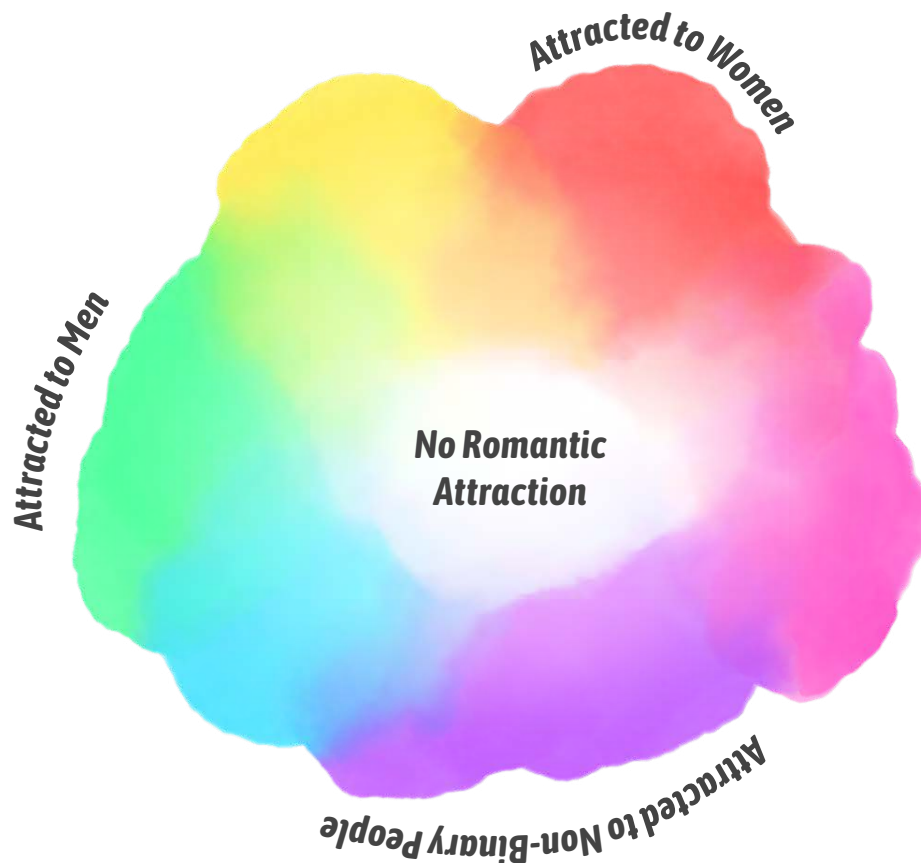
Have I ever had a crush on someone before?

Who have I had crushes on?

Who do I want to experience romantic behaviors with?

Who do I want to experience romantic relationships with?

How do you experience romantic attraction? Mark below on the Romantic Attraction Map with the ways in which you do or do not feel romantic attraction.



Emotional Attraction

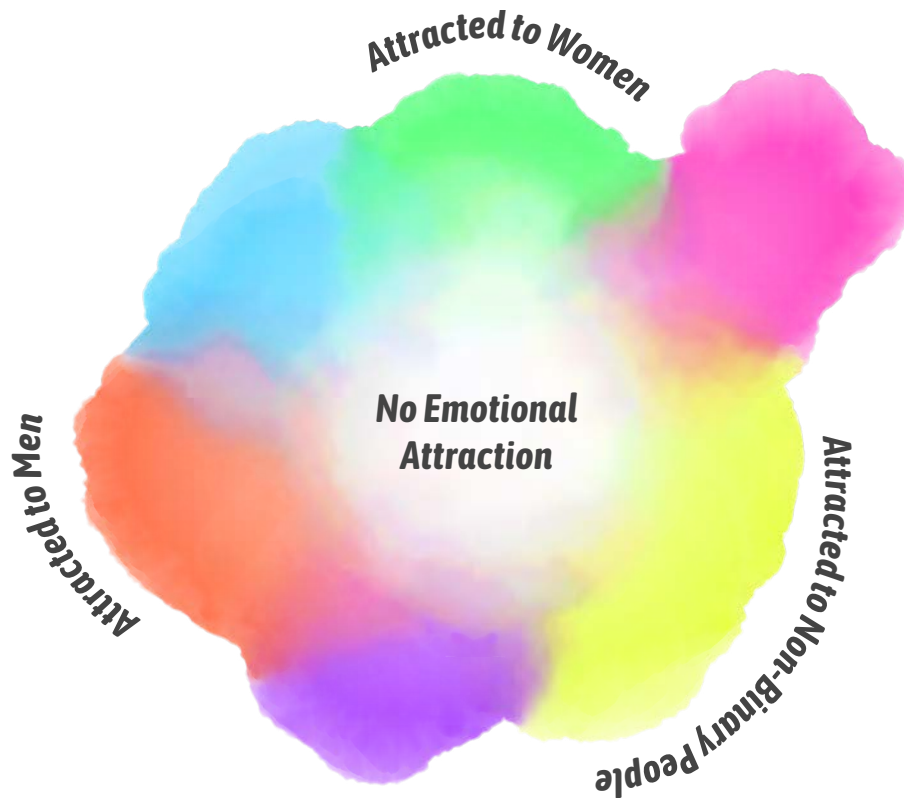
Emotional Attraction is characterized by the desire to connect with others on a deep emotional level. This could look like wanting to become best friends with someone or feeling emotionally “drawn” to someone based on their personality.

Who do I have strong desires to be emotionally close to?

Who do I feel an emotional bond towards?

Who do I want to get to know better?

We encourage you to plot out how emotional attraction looks for you below. Where do you find yourself?



COMING OUT

Coming out to yourself or someone else is an incredibly personal decision. There's no right or wrong way to do it. It's completely up to you and your relationship with who you might share it with. For those who want to come out, taking stock of who in your life supports and encourages you, and helps you feel less alone can make a big difference.

There are lots of different ways to come out! Here are just a few examples:

- Calling someone on the phone
- Sending a text
- Sending an email
- Writing a letter
- Talking with someone in person

Planning Ahead

You might decide to take some time to prepare what you want to say. Writing out how you might want to come out to someone can be useful. Practicing with supportive people can also help in figuring out what you want to say and how you want to say it.

How do I want to come out to them?

What would I say to someone I want to come out to?

What would I expect them to say?

Is there a way I would want to prepare prior to coming out?

If you are thinking about coming out, it can be important to think about the range of reactions people may have, including the good ones and the bad ones. Here are some questions to think through how they might react:

What are some of the good responses I may hear?

What are some of the bad responses I may hear?

What do I expect their reactions will be, based on what I know about the person I'm sharing with?

How do I want them to react?

Keep in mind that other people's reactions can be quite varied.

Testing The Waters

Figuring out how people feel about LGBTQ people and topics can give you an idea about how they might possibly react (though not always).

Some ways that other people have tested the waters:

Asking how they feel about an LGBTQ celebrity

Asking how they feel about marriage equality

Listening to their words: Do they put down LGBTQ people? Do they invoke LGBTQ stereotypes?

Noticing how they handle difficult emotional events, which can help you guess what reactions to be ready for

Sometimes the people we come out to ask a lot of questions. It's okay to not have all the answers; it is not your job to be the expert on your identities. If you feel comfortable, you are always welcome to answer these potential questions, but you don't owe anyone any information that you aren't comfortable sharing.

Environment

Timing

There is no perfect time to come out. In fact, the best time will probably change depending on who you want to tell. Sometimes it is helpful to wait for a time when the person you tell feels relaxed, open, and willing to listen. Other times, you may need to share at a random moment. It is about whenever it feels right to you. Here are some questions to think through to explore timing that might work for you:

What time works best for me to come out?

What time of day feels like a good time to share? (before school, after work, during dinner, etc.)

What time of year feels like a good time to share? (school season, summer, holidays, etc.)

What time works best for the person I want to come out to?

Location

Like timing, there is also no perfect place to come out. Some places might be safer or more comfortable for you than others.

Would I rather be in a public or private space?

Does home feel like a safe place to talk?

Where would we both be comfortable talking?

Is there a location special to me and the person I'm talking with?

School

Coming out at school can be a great way for some to connect with other LGBTQ classmates. School can also be an unsafe space for many people. When thinking about coming out at school, make sure to keep your safety and wellness in mind. You may want to make a safety plan for school if you feel like you might face some tough times.

How would being out at school make me feel?

Who would I want to share with at school?

Are there supportive faculty members, counselors, teachers or adults at my school?

Is there a Gender & Sexuality Alliance (GSA) or similar club/community that I feel comfortable attending?

Are there anti-bullying rules that protect LGBTQ students that are enforced?

Will coming out put my safety at risk? If so, what steps can I take to stay safe?

Support

Think about people in your life who would support you no matter what.

Who do I feel safe with?

Who do I feel comfortable sharing about my life with?

Who in my life has my back no matter what?

Who in my life builds up my confidence?

These supportive people could be:

- Real-life and online friends, classmates
- Team members, school club members, online communities
- Teachers, counselors, doctors, co-workers
- Family members, caretakers, parents, siblings, cousins, neighbors
- Religious or spiritual leaders

Safety Around Coming Out

Unfortunately, coming out doesn't always go according to our hopes and plans. If people don't react the way we wish, it does not reflect on the realness of our identities, and it is not our fault. You deserve to be accepted with open arms, care, and love. In situations where things are feeling unsafe or you expect that they might be, it could make sense to prepare a back-up plan for housing, food, school, and/or transportation, just in case. Your safety and well-being are of the utmost priority. And The Trevor Project is always here for you and has your back.

Check out the Resources section in the back for local and/or online resources that can be a support before, during, and after coming out.

HEALTHY RELATIONSHIPS

As you explore your identity and coming out, a very important part of that process can be the consideration of dating and/or starting a relationship with special someone(s). With that can come a great deal of excitement and even a bit of anxiety as you get to know someone new.

While navigating this process, it is important to know the difference between a healthy relationship and one that might be unhealthy. Only you can define your expectations, boundaries, and needs. Remember, you reserve the right to express when something doesn't feel right, and we all deserve to feel safe and secure with people we are dating.

- Healthy relationships can be characterized by trust, honesty, mutual respect, open communication and most importantly feeling safe and secure.
- Unhealthy relationships may be characterized by elements of control, sometimes manifesting physically, emotionally, and/or sexually. Violence, coercion, or force of any kind is not healthy and does not create a safe, respectful space for all partners.
- Consent to engage in sexual, physical, and/or romantic intimacy is extremely important and must be enthusiastically and freely given by each person. You always have the right to say no or stop an intimate experience, no matter the reason, no matter if you've been intimate with that person before, and no matter if you consented to another behavior earlier. This goes for the person/people you are being intimate with as well. Everyone must consent.



SELF-CARE

Coming out and learning more about yourself can sometimes feel like a roller coaster — full of emotional ups and downs. To stay healthy, it's important to discover what helps you feel cared for, relaxed, and able to cope with everything that's going on. This is called "self-care," and it's about taking care of YOU. Coming up with some go-to self-care ideas can be a helpful way to make your mental and physical health a priority. Sometimes we all need a little extra self-care when times are tough. Checking in on how you're feeling mentally, emotionally, and physically is a great way to help keep track of when this might be needed for you.

Here are some ideas for a self care plan:

1. Call, text, or chat with a friend for support
2. Talk to a supportive person in your life if you're feeling sad or unsafe
3. Identify safe places you can go to if you need to get away from a stressful situation
4. Connect with a trained counselor via TrevorLifeline, TrevorText, or TrevorChat
5. Log on to TrevorSpace.org to connect with other LGBTQ young people
6. Focus on your interests: Do something you enjoy. Write your thoughts out in a journal or create an art project to express your feelings
7. Connect with your body: Take deep breaths. Take a shower or bath. Some people find movement like yoga, walking, or running helpful. You know your body best and what feels good for you
8. Put on headphones and listen to your favorite music
9. Watch your favorite TV show and relax
10. Remind yourself that you are a valuable person exactly as you are

When I'm having a hard time, what do I do to cope?

What helps me stay healthy, relaxed and positive?

Who could I call, text, or chat with if I need support?

What are my favorite things to do?

What are my goals for the future?

What are some self-care activities I want to try out?

“Most of the time, I relieve my stress by writing. Also, I make sure to laugh and have fun, despite my difficult situations.”

—Brad, 18 (California)

Checking in on Your Mental Health

Warning Signs

Feeling sad or alone can be overwhelming, especially if people in your life are unsupportive. While these feelings are completely normal, it’s important to keep an eye out for warning signs of larger mental health struggles. You are not alone and asking for help is a sign of strength.

Have You Felt...?

Unimportant
Trapped and/or Hopeless
Overwhelmed and/or Unmotivated
Alone
Angry and/or Irritable
Impulsive
Suicidal

Have You Been...?

Using drugs or alcohol more than usual
Acting differently than usual
Giving away your most valuable possessions
Losing interest in your favorite things to do
Planning for death by writing a will or letter
Eating or sleeping more or less than usual
Feeling more sick, tired, or achy than usual

Do You...?

Not care about the future
Put yourself down (and think you deserve it)
Plan to say goodbye to important people
Have a specific plan for suicide

If you answered yes to any/several of these questions, you can reach out to a trained crisis counselor for support by calling TrevorLifeline (866.488.7386), texting “START” to 678678 for TrevorText, or by visiting TrevorChat.org — we’re here for you 24/7. *You are not alone.*

RESOURCES

Family Acceptance Project (research, intervention, education and policy initiative that works to prevent health and mental health risks for LGBTQ children and youth): familyproject.sfsu.edu

Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network (organization working to create safe and affirming schools for all, regardless of sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression): GLSEN.org

Gender Spectrum (organization working to help create gender sensitive and inclusive environments for all children and teens): genderspectrum.org

GLBT Near Me (database of LGBTQ resources, offers a national hotline and a youth talkline): glbtnearme.org

GSA Network (trans and queer youth uniting for racial and gender justice): gsanetwork.org

HelpPRO (national search for social workers, mental health counselors, and psychologists, with the ability to search for providers who serve specifically LGBTQ populations): helppro.com

Human Rights Campaign (largest civil rights organization working to achieve equality for LGBTQ Americans): hrc.org

It Gets Better Project (creating media sharing stories around the resilience of LGBTQ people across the globe): itgetsbetter.org

Lambda Legal (American civil rights organization focusing on equality for LGBTQ people): lambdalegal.org

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline (national network of local crisis centers that provide free and confidential emotional support to people in suicidal crisis or emotional distress 24/7): suicidepreventionlifeline.org, 800.273.8255

Scarleteen (inclusive, comprehensive, supportive sexuality and relationships info for teens and emerging adults): scarleteen.com

TransLifeLine (peer support hotline run by and for trans people, providing microgrants around legal name changes or updating IDs): TransLifeLine.org, 877.565.8860

Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (nation's largest family and ally organization): PFLAG.org

The Institute for Welcoming Resources (international organization working to make churches become welcoming and affirming spaces for all congregants regardless of sexual orientation and gender identity): welcomingresources.org

Trans Youth Family Allies (partnering with educators, service providers and communities, to develop supportive environments in which gender may be expressed and respected): imatyfa.org

TREVOR PROGRAMS



TrevorLifeline

If you're thinking about suicide, you deserve immediate help. Call us anytime.

866.488.7386



TrevorText

Talk to a Trevor counselor via text message.

Text "START" to 678678



TrevorChat

Online instant messaging with a TrevorChat counselor.

TrevorChat.org



TrevorSpace

A social networking site for LGBTQ youth under 25, and their friends & allies.

TrevorSpace.org



Suicide Prevention & General Info

Information on suicide prevention and FAQs on sexual orientation, gender identity and other topics can be found at:

TheTrevorProject.org/resources

Map Your Own Identity

You can download and print The Gender Identity and Sexual Orientation "Map" and fill it out based on how you personally feel right now. It's okay to not have everything figured out. It's also okay if you change your mind and find yourself feeling differently tomorrow, next week, or next year.

TRVR.org/IdentityMap