

Some potential themes of identity evolution/formation are presented below:

- **Differences:** Many LGBT people report feeling “different” as children or adolescents. However, the difference can take many forms such as gender atypical interests, not feeling like they fit into any peer group, or not meeting parents’ or society’s expectations. A common experience is a lack of language to describe the difference. Feeling different often results in alienation and isolation.
- **Confusion:** Many LGBT people report feeling confused at some point. The confusion can be because of incongruence between internal feelings and how one is perceived by others, and/or it can be related to gender-role behaviors, physical appearance, sexual or emotional attractions, mannerisms (such as the way one moves one’s hands). Confusion can be an unsettling emotional state.
- **Exploration:** Individuals use many methods of identity comparison to others in the mainstream or to those with sexual/gender minority identities. There are no right or wrong ways to explore, but some forms of exploration carry greater risks than others, for example unsafe sexual practices and making one’s difference more obvious to others, which increases risk for violence.
- **Disclosure:** All LGBT people must make some conscious decisions about whether to disclose information about their gender or sexuality to others, and they must consciously weigh the risks and benefits of disclosure in each new situation. The costs of disclosure may be too great. These decisions must be respected. Disclosure decisions can be separate from internal identity processes.
- **Labeling:** Some individuals ultimately decide on an identity label such as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender, whereas others choose queer, genderqueer, fluid, kinky, two-spirit, or other designation; or they refuse to engage in labeling at all. There is no empirical evidence that adopting a label for one’s gender or sexuality is more psychologically healthy than not adopting a label. Labels are culture-bound concepts.
- **Cultural Immersion:** Some individuals who live in sufficiently large cities may immerse themselves in LGBT communities. Although commonly reported in identity models, this option is not available to most LGBT people, who must live in many worlds and communities. Rather than cultural immersion, some individuals may experience cognitive and emotional immersion in their identities that manifests as a preoccupation with identity issues.
- **Distrust of the Oppressor:** Part of developing a political awareness of sexual and gender identities involves recognizing the role of oppression on the group and the individual. Many individuals react with anger, distrust, disappointment, or rejection of groups that have acted in a discriminatory way toward them.
- **Degree of Integration:** Although most identity models end with integration of sexual identity into the personality as a seamless whole, the reality is that our social circumstances change constantly; and experiences of oppression, discrimination, and violence may trigger the privileging of certain identities at certain times. To be acutely aware of one’s sexual identity when a string of murders of LGBT people has occurred is normal.
- **Internalized Oppression:** All members of stigmatized groups are exposed to negative stereotypes and internalize them to some degree. Overcoming the effects of racism, sexism, homophobia, biphobia, transphobia, ableism, classism, and so on, are lifelong processes in many people’s lives.
- **Managing Stigma:** LGBT people must learn to negotiate their social contexts. Attitudes about LGBT people are influenced by many types and degrees of stigma, which may vary considerably in an individual’s life or over time.
- **Identity Transformation:** Change is difficult for individuals and their social networks no matter the direction of the change, whether from heterosexual to gay, from lesbian to bisexual, from bisexual to transgender, or more controversially from gay to heterosexual.
- **Authenticity:** For many individuals, the identity formation process means moving from a position of hiding, secrecy, and denying to being able to fully accept and express oneself. That expression of authenticity may involve the choice of sexual and/or life partners, dressing or appearing the way one feels inside, or choosing hobbies, jobs, and interests according to one’s likes and dislikes rather than the expectations of family or society. Living in an authentic manner does not necessarily require labeling oneself in any particular way but follows the philosophy “to thine own self be true.”

If you would like to explore more with a counselor about any concerns/ issues you may be experiencing, please contact CAPS at 860-685-2910 to schedule an initial appointment.

Reference:

Eliason M.J., Schope R. (2007) Shifting Sands or Solid Foundation? Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Identity Formation. In: Meyer I.H., Northridge M.E. (eds) The Health of Sexual Minorities. Springer, Boston, MA