



HEALTH AND WELLNESS

LGBTQ and straight, cisgender dating are vastly different. Or are they?

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Kel Fisher doesn't remember "coming out," exactly. "I do remember watching 'Glee' with my mom and sister as a kid – maybe about 8 years old – and learning what 'lesbian' means, and accepting that that was probably how I was," the 18-year-old says.

Fisher had several girlfriends in middle and high school, but considers them relationships of convenience more than anything else.

"It was like, 'Well, I guess we're dating now because we're both gay and who else is there?'" they said.

Therein lies the conundrum that is dating as a queer person. There are fewer fish in the sea and queer people may struggle to come out in the first place. As such, LGBTQ people face dating challenges beyond that of their straight and cisgender counterparts.

"Everyone experiences rejection, ghosting, heartbreak, infatuation, love, desire, passion, romance, fun, pleasure, play, pain, hurt, disappointment and so on," says Moe A. Brown, a licensed marriage and family therapist. "At the end of the day, most humans crave connection and that is a feeling that transcends gender or sexual orientation."

Good question: Could coming out as LGBTQ be over someday?

Queer or not, 'dating can be hell'

Modern dating can be as simple as swiping right and meeting your perfect match. But it rarely is.

"Whether you're queer or (heterosexual), dating can be hell across the sexual and gender spectrums," says Jane Fleishman, author of "The Stonewall Generation: LGBTQ Elders on Sex, Activism, and Aging." "That's because dating is often focused first on appearances, then on age, race and then, way after all of that, on who you are inside."

Brown adds every community has its own set of challenges.

Remember people, at the end of the day, are still people.

"A person is an individual before they are a queer person," Kelli McAdams, 29, says. But those in the LGBTQ community also know they face a unique set of challenges, such as stereotypes based on their sexual orientation.

McAdams, for example, is sick of the assumption that queer women move fast in relationships. "Just because I'm bisexual doesn't mean that I'm immediately going to meet the next girl that I find and fall in love and move in with her."

In case you missed: Many are more comfortable in their bodies during the pandemic. For some LGBTQ people, it's the opposite.

Queer people evade 'typical gender roles'

Just 5.6% of U.S. adults identify as LGBTQ people – and while that is a record number, it is lightyears away from the cisgender, heterosexual population. That realization alone troubles hopeless romantics in the queer community – emphasis on the hopeless.

It doesn't help when media portrayals of LGBTQ people have historically been few and far between.

"We can find millions of examples of lasting (heterosexual) partnerships," Brown says. "For queer people, there is a deficit in model relationships that serve as hope for the future and as a template for what new definition of relationship, family and dating can look like."

But that also doesn't have to be a bad thing. "One of my favorite differences includes the joy of not feeling the need to fit into the typical gender roles that we have been socialized to accept," Ashley Ertel, a licensed clinical social worker, says.

Ariella Serur, a dating coach specializing in queer relationships, agrees. "In queer relationships, we get to decide what feels good here, what do I want to do, and then I can lean into that without worrying so much about what we're supposed to be doing," Serur says.

It's not just you: Dating and hookups are back, but it can be overwhelming. Here's how to ease back in.

Transgender people face harsh dating discrimination

Wrinkles persist nonetheless: Queer people may enter the world of dating later in life or face discrimination from relatives.

Dating can also look more complicated for the transgender community, where intimate partner violence is exceedingly more common than for cisgender people.

"Members of the transgender community are more likely than other members of the queer community, and most definitely than cisgender people, to need to fear for their safety and being fetishized when it comes to dating," says Israel Martinez, a licensed clinical social worker and certified sex therapist.

Transgender people face discrimination from cisgender heterosexual people. "You can make about five swipes on any dating app before you see a line on someone's profile that says 'no trans people' or 'if you're trans, swipe left,'" Brown says.

But love finds a way. "While dating is more difficult for the queer community, it is important to remember that there are so many queer people in happy and healthy relationships," Martinez says.

'Being transgender is not a medical condition': The meaning of trans broken arm syndrome

Tips for queer dating: 'Be your own #couplesgoals'

Authenticity is key. "If the real you is queer, then allow yourself to be seen and witnessed fully," Brown says. "When dating, allow yourself to create your own blueprint for your relationship. Be your own #couplesgoals."

Communicate. "Put your cards on the table and create space for your partner to do the same for you," Ertel says. "Communication is key to any relationship, and is even more critical in relationships that are under scrutiny."

Show up. Want your rom-com meet cute? Make it happen. "Think of all the places you've fantasized about meeting your match, then go to the places," Brown says. "Moreover, go to places where queer people hang out or join social clubs that will allow you to broaden your network of queer community and you just might meet someone through an acquaintance."

Take care of yourself first. "Take time to embrace your identity outside of whether or not you're dating someone," Fisher says.

Don't assume someone's intentions. Avoid catering to stereotypes. Not all queer men are *only* interested in sex. And not all queer women want to leap into a long-term relationship.

If you're not queer, be an ally. "All of us, regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity, need love, kindness and respect. Heterosexuals and cisgender people can become strong allies for their LGBTQ peers by practicing these ideals," Fleishman says. "Remember, it's never too late to find love."

Important: Pride Month is over. Here's how to be an ally to the LGBTQ community the rest of the year.