

Hiro is 18 and is “worried he might be gay”. He has a girlfriend who he loves very much but has recently found himself looking at other boys at school. He has been out on the gay scene a few times, been “picked up” and enjoyed having sex with a couple of men. He then feels really guilty, however, and doesn’t know what to do.

Think about:

- What is your formulation/understanding of the key issues for Hiro?
- What assumptions might you have about Hiro’s sexuality on the basis of this information?
- What might be Hiro’s received understandings from dominant cultures?
- How would you proceed?

Perhaps the vitally important thing with somebody in Hiro’s position is to ensure that your own assumptions and understandings around sexuality do not unwittingly serve to close down options. If you have had no training at all around sexuality, then you should refer such a client on to somebody who has. A good check to do with yourself is to ask yourself whether you would be equally satisfied whatever sexual identity Hiro decided to take on, or indeed if he decided not to fix on any of them.

It seems that there are two key issues for Hiro. First what his sexual identity is, and, second, how to manage the specific situation with his girlfriend. We will deal with the former here (see Chapters 13 and 14 for more on the latter).

If you are in a counselling role (remember to refer on appropriately and be matter of fact if you are not) you could encourage Hiro to come up with all of the sexual identities that he is aware of and which he thinks might possibly apply to him. Using his language, and taking one at a time, you could together explore his understanding of that identity, where the understanding comes from in relation to his background and culture, and what he feels would be gained and lost if he were to apply that identity to himself. It is important to be aware that he may feel he has to be gay or straight and so offering the potential of bisexuality (again addressing any assumptions) may be useful.

Where negative stereotypes emerge it is useful to encourage Hiro to ask himself whether they are accurate (for example, a stereotype of effeminacy

will most likely not fit the gay men he has met). It is also useful to consider the various cultural assumptions and understandings from his background and the scene he has engaged with. It may be, for example, that the gay clubbing scene is not for him, but that a gay choir is. Or perhaps a specifically bisexual club would be more comfortable.

Fiona is a woman in her late forties who came to you a year ago when she was dealing with the bereavement of her partner, Kate. Kate and Fiona had been together since they met at university when Fiona was an undergraduate and Kate was a lecturer. They lived in a rural community where there were many other lesbian couples, and Fiona had a successful business making and selling pottery. Now she has contacted you asking whether she could see you again to work through the process of starting to look for another partner.

Think about:

- What is your formulation/understanding of the key issues for Fiona?
- What assumptions might you have about Fiona's sexuality on the basis of this information?
- How would you proceed?

You agree to see Fiona again and when she comes to her first session she seems nervous and distracted. You comment on this and she says that she is anxious about how you will respond to what she has to say. She then tells you that she has always been bisexual and now that Kate has gone she has decided that this is a part of her which she wants to explore further. However, she is scared about how everyone – including you – will perceive her and she now regrets very much the fact that she let everyone assume that she was lesbian for all these years.

You tell Fiona that you try not to assume people's sexualities on the basis of the relationships they are in, but say that you empathise with her worries because you know that bisexuality is often invisible in these ways. Together you explore what her bisexuality means to her and how she has thought about exploring this further. Fiona says that she has been finding herself increasingly attracted to men over the past decade and would like to act on this, but that she is fearful that it will be harder to find men than it is to find women at her age, and that heterosexual men may be much more obsessed with youth and beauty and put off by her previous relationship. She would want Kate to be respected by any new partner. Also, Fiona admits to being terrified about how her friends and community might respond if she has a male partner. She sees these things as "her life" and couldn't bear another loss so soon after the last one.

You help Fiona to locate some online support for bisexual people, and a bisexual group in a nearby city to which she could go along. In addition to

this you find out about an organisation for older LGBT people which has a phoneline she could ring. Exploring with you her relationships to specific people in her life, she also remembers one friend who is in a relationship with a woman but also very close to her ex-husband. She decides this would be a safe person to talk with initially. You agree to keep seeing Fiona over the following months as she takes these steps towards claiming a bisexual identity.