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Why some bisexual men stay in the closet

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Research conducted at Columbia University's Mailman School of Public Health and Public Health Solutions examined the reasons why men who have had sex with both men and women choose not to disclose their sexual orientation—particularly to their wives and girlfriends. Results show that men wanted to avoid the stigma and homophobia they felt certain would lead to strong negative emotional reactions and profound changes in their relationships. Findings are published online in the journal *Archives of Sexual Behavior*.

Using a large, ethnically diverse sample, the researchers examined the reasons these behaviorally bisexual men offered for why they had not told —a nd frequently never planned to tell—their friends, family, and female partners about their sexual orientation. In-depth interviews were conducted with 203 behaviorally bisexual men in New York City who had never disclosed their same-sex behavior to their female sexual partners. To be eligible, men had to be at least 18 years of age; not self-identify as gay; and report having had sex with a man and sex with a woman in the past year. Men were recruited from Internet websites, print ads, and nonparticipant referrals.

"Our results clearly identify the need for public education campaigns to dispel myths about bisexual men—that bisexual men are not gay, do not have HIV, and are not necessarily non-monogamous," said Eric W. Schrimshaw, PhD, associate professor of Sociomedical Sciences at the Mailman School of Public Health. "Further, the anticipated negative reactions from female partners suggest the need for strategies to assist behaviorally bisexual men disclose their sexual history in ways that

minimize negative reactions and work with the couple to preserve the relationship."

The men consistently reported anticipating stigma for having sex with men and specified a number of reasons for non-disclosure, including anticipation of negative emotional reactions; anticipation of negative changes in relationships; belief that their family, friends, and female partners held stigmatizing attitudes toward homosexuality; and prior experience with negative reactions to disclosure.

Men in the study did not report a heterosexual identity, identity uncertainty, or other identity issues as reasons for non-disclosure. "Rather our findings suggested that non-disclosure of sexual orientation among behaviorally bisexual men is often used as a strategy to avoid anticipated stigmatizing responses from their social network such as ridicule, rejection, and victimization," said Schrimshaw.

Perhaps the most novel reason identified for non-disclosure was that all men commonly viewed the religious and/or cultural background of their friends, family, and female partners as a barrier to disclosure because they believed it contributed to the anticipation of rejecting reactions.Theories on disclosure of sexual orientation among gay men are conflicting. "While some research suggests that disclosure of sexual orientation is part of identity development and that disclosure occurs after they become more confident and self-accepting of their sexual identity, this was not our finding," said Martin J. Downing, Jr. of Public Health Solutions.

The researchers say their findings show that bisexual men may be more likely than gay men to anticipate stigmatizing reactions from others. However, they caution that their research did not compare bisexual men's reasons to those of gay men, and therefore it is still unclear whether gay men perceive less sigma (and therefore are more likely to

disclose) or if gay and bisexual men experience similar levels of stigma perceptions prior to disclosure. "Such research is critical to understanding the potential causal order between stigma and disclosure among both gay and bisexual men," noted Dowling.

Earlier research by Schrimshaw suggested that high levels of emotional distress among behaviorally bisexual men are a result of concealment of their sexual orientation. "Thus the current findings provide new insights into why non-disclosure could result in greater emotional distress," said Schrimshaw.

Provided by Columbia University's Mailman School of Public Health

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