

## Frequently Asked Questions – a Resource for LGBTIQ and straight Korean Americans

*This FAQ was written to address commonly asked questions about issues surrounding the LGBTIQ Korean American community. While many of these questions and answers are universal for the LGBTIQ community, the answers provided in this document additionally address and highlight socio-political issues that are specifically relevant in the Korean American community. What does it mean to be queer and Korean? Why do LGBTIQ Koreans feel so alone?*

*We hope this to be the first of many resources available for LGBTIQ and straight Korean Americans regarding LGBTIQ issues and rights. This document is also translated into Korean and can be found at [www.kue-la.org](http://www.kue-la.org).*

*Written by: Anna Kim, Diane Kim and HyunJoo Lee*

*Contact: [kue.info@kue-la.org](mailto:kue.info@kue-la.org)*

### **1. I feel like I'm the only LGBTIQ Korean person I know. Am I alone?**

Of course you are not alone! In cities all across the U.S. like New York City (Dari Project), Los Angeles (KUE), San Diego (UCSD Chingusai, check out their recent Queer Korean Narratives 'zine!) and Seattle (Sahngnoksoo), queer Koreans are banding together and organizing in our communities and changing the perception that we are alone and recognizing the diversity that makes up the Queer Korean community. The stereotype in the Korean and many API communities is that being "Gay" is a "white" or "American" thing. Non heteronormative loving and sexual relationships and transgendered people have existed throughout history in every culture - including Korea's.

There are many queer and LGBTIQ Koreans in Korea, in the United States and other places, actively working to dispel stereotypes about what it means to be Korean and Queer and to fight for many civil rights. In Korea, each June there is a Pride celebration *Korean Queer Culture Festival* (this year was the 11<sup>th</sup> annual celebration), as well as many organizations and resources. These include: Chingusai, a gay men's rights advocacy organization, (<http://chingusai.net/>) and the Korean Sexual Minority and Rights Center (<http://www.ksrc.org/>) in Seoul. There is also a lesbian-run radio station called Lezpa (<http://cafe.daum.net/lezpa>) that you can listen to if you have a Korean Citizen ID number.

If you live in Southern California, or near any of the groups mentioned above, please contact them - get together! We at KUE are here to talk to you, as we are going through many of the same difficulties and experiences as Queer Koreans. KUE meets the first Monday of every month at 7pm at the Korean Resource Center located at 900 Crenshaw Boulevard in Los Angeles. Snacks and good company will be provided!

If you're heading to Seoul, don't forget to check out 'Homo Hill' in Itaewon and the many lesbian bars and lounges in Hongdae.

## Frequently Asked Questions – a Resource for LGBTIQ and straight Korean Americans

### **2. Are there resources for Korean or Asian Pacific Islander (API) LGBTIQ people? Where?**

Yes, there are many resources for Korean and API LGBTIQ people; from information about how to come out to your parents to the API movement for marriage equality, many resources are now available online. For FAQs addressing the Korean American queer community as well as in-language resources for parents of queer Korean Americans, visit [www.kue-la.org](http://www.kue-la.org). Queer Koreans within Korean Americans United for Equality (KUE) also organize a space exclusively for queer Korean Americans – to build solidarity and for self-empowerment. For more information, please contact [kqsafespace@gmail.com](mailto:kqsafespace@gmail.com).

Also, there are organizations that specifically work with and provide resources for the API LGBTIQ community. For example, API Equality is a nonprofit coalition working towards marriage equality ([www.apiequalityla.org](http://www.apiequalityla.org)); the Los Angeles Gay and Lesbian Center has a list of referrals, services, and resources for LGBTIQ people ([www.laglc.convio.net](http://www.laglc.convio.net)); and the Gay Asian Pacific Support Network's website - [www.gapsn.org](http://www.gapsn.org) - has a comprehensive list of other API organizations in the Los Angeles area that provide a variety of services and opportunities for the Korean and API LGBTIQ communities.

### **3. I'm not ready to come out yet, is that okay? Who should I tell?**

No one knows more about you, or your life, your family, safety and well-being, than you. You are the best person to know when, and if, it is the right time for you to come out to your friends and family. You should know that the people around you have loved and cared for you your whole life because of who you are and not your gender or sexual orientation, but sometimes you have to remind them of that. As a Korean American LGBTIQ person, there are some additional cultural and/or language barriers around the process of coming out to your family - they may or may not understand what you are trying to tell them. It is also important to be aware that even when people love you, they may not be able to accept you right away as a Queer Korean American. Most people do not just "come out" once in their lifetime and there are different ways to be "out," all of which are okay. Some people are out to their siblings but not to their parents, or their closest friends but not at work or school. It is okay for you to decide who it is safe to tell and who you are comfortable telling. This may sound like vague advice, but there is no one right answer and no one can tell you what is best for you. People in our group at KUE are "out" in many different ways and have used many different methods: some people have preferred to talk about it via the telephone or write a letter, and some people prefer to talk face to face. Here are a few examples of how the coming out process has gone for some other Queer Korean Americans:

1. Some have come out to their moms but not their dads. Though it has been years since the QK (Queer Korean) told her mom she's a lesbian, the topic is rarely, if ever, addressed in the home or family. Mom helps keep the secret. Family conversations still suggest that the QK "get married" or "look for a husband" but it doesn't seem too serious - and a don't ask don't tell policy seems to prevail at home around the topic of the QK's queerness and any partners she may have. After struggling for years with the decision to

## Frequently Asked Questions – a Resource for LGBTIQ and straight Korean Americans

come out, the silence at home about the topic is confusing, frustrating, and at the same time soothing. The QK feels like she and her mom have an "understanding" for now, and yet knows that one day she will have to "come out" again.

2. Some QKs are out about being LGBTIQ to their friends and their family but not at work or school. They feel very strongly that it is nobody's business but theirs to know and may also be worried about experiencing gender and/or sex discrimination in the workplace. This is still a very real problem in many cities, in all sorts of jobs, but it is important to know that this type of discrimination is illegal and there is help available for people experiencing discrimination at work or at school (usually available for free through many non-profit or legal aid groups) to fight these kind of injustices at work and school. Once again, it is up to you to decide and despite what some people may tell you, it is okay for you to maintain your right to privacy in whatever situations you choose.

3. A young QK person is out to his best friend, but nobody else at school or in his family. He is worried about being labeled the "gay kid" at school, and worried about being kicked out of his house by his parents. Because he is young, he may not have a lot of help available to him or a lot of people he can talk to. The most important thing is his safety, and when you are a young person you might not have a place to go should any of the above happen. These are real issues to be aware of and it is possible that at the time you come out (to family or friends) you may experience some rejection and feel lonely or hurt. It is important, especially for students and youth, to assess their situation (especially if they are financially dependent on their parents or guardians) and decide what makes sense at this time. We do not want to avoid this possibility because in some cases, domestic violence in the Korean American community is a real concern, and Korean American health care providers know this is a problem in many families in our community. There are professional counselors available (in both Korean and English) to talk to you about this and for you and your parents to get help if this is occurring in your family. One place to start the discussion can be at KHEIR.

4. Many queereans in the Los Angeles area are "out" in almost all areas of their life (school, work, and friends - even strangers) but have yet to tell their parents or other family members that they are LGBTIQ. Often, it seems to be a generational as well as language barrier that makes this part much harder. It is possible to be "out and proud" - proud of being a Queer Korean and without feeling like you must or have to be "out" to every single person in your family, extended family, community and neighborhood. It is possible to contribute and fight for LGBTIQ rights and awareness. As Korean Americans, we often feel torn (in many ways) between two cultures, histories, and languages and only we can begin to reconcile these two sides of ourselves.

In sum, you do not have to come out and it does not have to be to any one person - it is up to you to decide who you are most comfortable sharing your experiences with. Trust your instincts, look for help, and make sure you have a safe place to go to and people you can trust for support, regardless of what you choose to do.

## Frequently Asked Questions – a Resource for LGBTIQ and straight Korean Americans

### **4. I am getting harassed at school/work. Are there any laws to protect me? Where can I go for help and resources?**

It is against the law for any person to be harassed or discriminated against on the basis of their race, sex, age, religion, gender, or sexual orientation. Harassment or discrimination is illegal, and you are protected under the law. There are many people who can help you - your local city or school LGBTIQ center is a good place to start. The American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) has also come to the aid of many people who experience discrimination at school or at work. In many cases, this kind of discrimination can be classified as a "hate crime" or "hate incident" because the harassment or violence is motivated on the basis of race, sex, religion, gender and/or sexual orientation. In some cases individuals may also experience "racial profiling" or other kinds of discrimination (even from the police) towards an LGBTIQ individual without evidence of any wrong-doing on your part. If this is happening to you it is important that you take detailed notes of such incidents, save any evidence of harassment or discrimination, and most importantly report to your boss or teacher/counselor and seek help right away. You can also find help by contacting the state FEPA (Fair Employment Practices Agency). A list of state FEPAs can be found here: <http://www.eeocoffice.com/>.

### **5. What if I don't fit the stereotype of LGBTIQ?**

Ignore the stereotypes. Be yourself. Stereotypes arise out of ignorance and prejudice and don't ever represent the entirety of any one group. Everyone is unique. We are who we are because of our genetic makeup and our unique personal experiences and choices, and these are never the same for any two people. This is what makes life and each one of us so beautiful. There is no one way or a right way of expression of self, including gender, queerness or Korean-ness. You have every right to be who you are and love whoever you want to love. We know that all of this is easier said than done, but learn to trust yourself and know that you are not alone.

### **6. Will my family and friends accept me if I tell them I'm LGBTIQ?**

Your friends and family love you for who you are, and when you come out to them, they will hopefully continue to support and accept you completely. They will hopefully recognize the courage it took for you to come out to them and realize being queer is just one more part of who you are and that nothing has changed. Stories of families and friendships growing stronger after a child or friend comes out do exist, but the truth is, there are also risks. Some parents and friends can react very strongly when they are told that their child or friend is queer, unable to accept the truth. There are stories, among queer Korean Americans, of parents disowning their children, or friendships ending.

To come out to your family and friends is a very difficult and personal decision to make. Whatever you decide, make sure that you are prepared, create a group of friends and mentors that will be your support

## Frequently Asked Questions – a Resource for LGBTIQ and straight Korean Americans

network, and equip yourself with resources to help your family and friends listen, reflect, understand and accept who you are when you come out to them.

Talk to other queer friends or mentors that have come out and listen to their stories - how did they decide to come out? Who did they tell? What was their reaction? You want to prepare yourself for different situations and know that no matter what - if they embrace you, tell you they need time, get upset with you, etc. - you are ready and have a support network that will help you move forward and grow stronger. There are resources that many groups have created about coming out - read through them and apply them to your own situation. No one family, friendship, or relationship is the same, and how you come out will be uniquely your own experience.

It might also be useful to research what resources are out there for parents, friends, and allies of queer persons, and have them on hand to pass along to your family and friends. For example, PFLAG has created FAQs for parents whose children have come out to them and also offer parent discussion groups (visit [www.community.pflag.org](http://www.community.pflag.org)). Each person has their own process, and being able to learn and read stories may help some of your family members and friends. But again, there are real risks and no matter how much you prepare, or how many pamphlets you share with them, they may still not be able to accept you. So know that there are real risks involved. However, talking to people about their coming out experiences, researching, and preparing yourself as much as you can, will help you as you decide to come out to your family and friends.

Coming out within the Korean American community has its particular challenges because of the fact that queer Korean Americans are not visible within the community. Homophobia is a real issue that our community faces, possibly more so than other API communities. During the November 2008 elections, when California had Prop 8 on the ballot, the Asian Pacific American Legal Center (APALC) conducted exit polls of Korean Americans and other API communities on how people voted on Prop 8. Among all of the API groups, Korean Americans voted in the highest numbers in support of Prop 8 - 72.8% of Korean American voters surveyed voted yes on

Prop 8. Age, immigration status, and religiosity seemed to be correlated to how KAs votes. 52.4% of 18-34 yeras old voted yes, 85.4% of those 35-54 years old voted yes, and 79% of those 55 and over voted yes. Meanwhile, 81.8% of immigrant Korean American voters supported Prop 8 while 34.9% of U.S.-born voters voted yes.

The point is, coming out within the Korean American community has particular challenges - language and cultural barriers, the role the church has played in the Korean American family, etc. But remember, whatever you decide, prepare and get the support you need.

## Frequently Asked Questions – a Resource for LGBTIQ and straight Korean Americans

### **7. I'm a LGBTIQ Asian American or LGBTIQ Korean American, am I still at risk for HIV/AIDS or other sexually transmitted diseases?**

Yes - everyone has the potential to acquire HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases. There is a false notion that HIV/AIDS is only a “gay” disease, but this is dangerously ignorant and rooted in and propagated through homophobia and misinformation. Everyone (gay or straight, Korean or not, and people of ALL sexual orientations) is at risk for HIV/AIDS and STDs. Everyone would benefit tremendously by educating themselves about the risks involved, the precautions people can take, the treatments available, and the responsibilities that fall on everyone to prevent the spread of HIV/AIDS or STDs. It is not who you are, but rather the actions you take that puts you and your loved ones at risk.

Here are some stats about HIV/AIDS and the alarming numbers in the API community.

- Thousands of people in the API community are infected with HIV/AIDS.
- 1 in 3 APIs do not know that they are infected.
- Half of APIs have never gotten tested.
- The infection rate within the API community is rising by 5-10% each year.

Efforts such as APAIT, the API Wellness Center, and the Banyan Tree Project (all listed below) are working to increase awareness of HIV/AIDS in API communities (FYI, May 19th, 2010 marked the 6th annual observance of National Asian & Pacific Islander HIV/AIDS Awareness Day).

The Korean American community in particular suffers from a lack of communication and information regarding HIV/AIDS and other STDs. We all need to work on educating ourselves as well as others in our community. We need to start talking about it! We need to get tested and take charge of our health, for the well-being of ourselves and our community. If you are sexually active in any way, it is important for you to get tested - respect yourself, your partners, and your community and get tested! Free and confidential HIV testing is available all over Los Angeles. Check [hivtest.org](http://hivtest.org) for locations near you.

Here are some links for more information about AIDS/HIV awareness and wellness for APIs (including information and counseling services IN KOREAN):

<http://www.apiwellness.org/home.html> (Asian and Pacific Islander Wellness Center  
Asian & Pacific Islander Wellness Center is a health services, education, research and policy organization dedicated to educating, supporting, empowering and advocating for Asian and Pacific Islander (A&PI) communities—particularly A&PIs living with or at risk for HIV/AIDS.

<http://www.banyantreeproject.org/>  
Saving face can't make you safe. Talk about HIV.

The Banyan Tree Project is a national campaign to end the silence and shame surrounding HIV/AIDS in Asian and Pacific Islander (A&PI) communities. The Banyan Tree Project produces an annual social

## Frequently Asked Questions – a Resource for LGBTIQ and straight Korean Americans

marketing campaign, the National Asian & Pacific Islander HIV/AIDS Awareness Day, and Capacity Building Assistance (CBA) programs, targeting community-based organizations serving Asians and Pacific Islanders.

<http://www.apaitonline.org/> (Asian Pacific AIDS Intervention Team)

The mission of Asian Pacific AIDS Intervention Team (APAIT) is to positively affect the quality of life for Asian and Pacific Islanders living with or at-risk for HIV/AIDS by providing a continuum of prevention, health and social services, community leadership and advocacy to the Southern California region. APAIT also have information and counseling services in English and Korean. Visit or call APAIT:

LA County Office (English & Korean)  
605 W. Olympic Blvd.  
Suite 610  
Los Angeles, CA 90015  
tel: (213) 553-1830

Orange County office (English)  
12900 Garden Grove Blvd.  
Suite 214A  
Garden Grove, CA 92843  
tel: (714) 636-1349  
fax: (714) 636-8828

### **8. Why are some people LGBTIQ? Is it okay to be LGBTIQ?**

Being gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, or questioning is just as natural as being heterosexual. Still, the question of why some people are LGBTIQ and why others are not continues to rally interest and stir debate.

“Why does it matter? If I’m LGBTIQ for this or that reason, or all of the above, the bottom line is that I am still LGBTIQ.”

To understand the issue, we have to look into the way that homosexuality has largely been perceived by the general public. For much of history, homosexuality was believed to be a “disorder”. In 1973, the American Psychiatric Association finally reclassified homosexuality as a sexual orientation or expression and not a mental disorder (1, 6). This correction came about when researchers discovered that they could not distinguish homosexuals from heterosexuals based on psychological analyses or dysfunctional or adverse life events (5, 6). Bottom line: there is nothing “abnormal” about being homosexual. Homosexuality is just as “normal” as heterosexuality.

## Frequently Asked Questions – a Resource for LGBTIQ and straight Korean Americans

So then, why are some people gay and others not? Many people, to this day, seek to find an answer to this question. What is it that makes people gay? On the one hand, there's the idea that it's a choice and/or that it's a product of the environment a person grows up in. On the other, there is the argument for a genetic predisposition and/or hormonal influences. It is a difficult subject to tackle because to say wholly one way or another is impossible without grossly over generalizing the entire queer population. What we can say is, just by observing the sexual practices of animals in their natural environments, we know that homosexuality has biological roots (4, 9). And as with any other inherent predisposition, these inclinations can present stronger in some than in others. Human sexuality is complex and most likely exists as a continuum from solely heterosexual to solely homosexual, with many people lying somewhere in between (as many surveys of different populations have shown) (3).

Some people consider gender identity and sexual orientation as just another phenotype (any observable characteristic or trait of an organism)—very much like height or weight, but not as easily quantifiable. There are many studies that provide strong evidence for prenatal mechanism(s) that affect a person's sexual orientation (2, 4), report associations between homosexuality in men and loci on the X chromosome (8) show neuro-anatomical differences between homosexual men and heterosexual men (7), show high concordance of homosexuality among monozygotic twins and clustering of family pedigrees. All these studies support the idea that genetic and/or hormonal influences contribute, at least in some part, to shaping one's sexual orientation. Genetics is a very complex matter, however. There can be many genes that contribute to any one phenotype, and scientists are now learning that the expression of genes can be affected by environmental factors without any changes to a person's genetic makeup (research 'epigenetic modifiers' for more information). So the environment can influence the genes you carry. What all of this means is that being LGBTIQ does not necessarily equate to carrying a 'gay gene.' It is in the same way that there is no 'tall gene' or 'skinny gene'.

The environment a person grows up in can also have substantial influence in shaping who a person becomes. Even very subtle differences can lead to different traits and characteristics. There are many examples of identical twins, who have the same genetic makeup, who grow up together in the same household, yet can grow to be very different people—where one is more athletic than the other, or more out-going than the other, etc. These are clear examples that environmental influences can be just as significant as genetic predispositions. While the environment surely plays a role in shaping a person, there is no evidence that trauma such as a dysfunctional family life (e.g. abusive or detached parents) or sexual abuse influences sexual orientation (4, 6, 10). Of course, you will find some LGBTIQ who have encountered unfortunate experiences, but you will also find others who grew up in a perfectly healthy environment. The same goes for heterosexuals.

Ultimately, it's not a matter of nature VS nurture, but rather one of nature AND nurture. Sexual orientation is most likely determined by a combination of genetic, hormonal and environmental influences (8).

The decision to express one's sexual orientation is a choice, whether homosexual or heterosexual. These choices can be greatly influenced by societal attitudes. The adverse attitude toward homosexuality of



## Frequently Asked Questions – a Resource for LGBTIQ and straight Korean Americans

some (not all) people in the Korean American community is a big reason why LGBTIQ KAs feel unable to come out and express their queerness. Additionally, there is a deeply rooted sense of familial responsibility that is ingrained in many of us. We live not only for ourselves, but rather our actions and behaviors cast a direct reflection upon our families and loved ones. As a result, many queer KAs choose to remain in the closet for fear of the reaction from their families and community, and thus a false perception is created that there are very few queer Koreans. But just as LGBTIQ people are gaining more political and social acceptance in the United States, they are also making similar progress in Korea - all of which come together to create positive CHANGE - change happens every day and KUE believes that the Korean American community has the same potential. These are our families, our friends, our loved ones - and showing our love for each other is what will help Queer Korean Americans to be truly accepted in all ways.

1. **Association, A. P.** 1987. Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders. American Psychiatric Association.
2. **Camperio-Ciani, A., Corna, F., Capiluppi, C.** 2004. Evidence for maternally inherited factors favouring male homosexuality and promoting female fecundity. *Proc. R. Soc. Lond. B* **271**:2217-2221.
3. **Frankowski, B. L., Committee on Adolescence.** 2004. Sexual orientation and adolescents. *Pediatrics* **113**:1827-1832.
4. **Friedman, R. C., Downey, J.L.** 1994. Homosexuality. *New England Journal of Medicine*:923-930.
5. **Friedman, R. C., Downey, J.L.** 1993. Psychoanalysis, psychobiology and homosexuality. *J. Am Psychoanal Assoc* **41**:1159-1198.
6. **Gonsiorek, J. C.** 1991. The empirical basis for the demise of the illness model of homosexuality.
7. **Le Vay, S.** 1991. A difference in hypothalamic structure between heterosexual and homosexual men. *Science* **253**:1034-1037.
8. **Perrin, E. C., and ebrary Inc.** 2002. Sexual orientation in child and adolescent health care, p. 199 p. Kluwer Academic, New York.
9. **Rupp, L. J.** 2009. *Sapphistries : a global history of love between women*, vol. New York University Press, New York.
10. **Stronski Huwiler, S. M., Remafedi, G.** 1998. Adolescent homosexuality. *Advances in Pediatrics* **45**:107-144.

### 9. Can I have a family of my own?

Yes. Families come in many different forms, sizes, numbers, colors, and types. You yourself may not come from a "traditional" Korean American family because there really is no such thing. Differences of all kinds should be respected and welcomed. Forming a loving, healthy LGBTIQ family is no different: it can be just as easy, and just as difficult, as the families other people work to create and maintain. As Queer Korean Americans our "family values" are to create strong, loving households that can support mothers, fathers,

## Frequently Asked Questions – a Resource for LGBTIQ and straight Korean Americans

children, grandparents, aunts, uncles, siblings and cousins of all backgrounds. We are a large community, full of diversity and already full of so many different kinds of families.

There are many resources available for Queer parents, and in the Los Angeles area there are support groups for Queer Asian Americans parents (contact API Equality [contact@apiequalityla.org](mailto:contact@apiequalityla.org) or AQWA [info@aqwa.org](mailto:info@aqwa.org) for more information). Queer Korean Americans are fighting to build a "family" amongst ourselves, and to fight for respect and the right to love each other.

### **10. What are some resources for allies and parents of queer children?**

Parents, Families, and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG) has many resource for allies and parents of queer children; their website ([www.community.pflag.org](http://www.community.pflag.org)) has many readings, FAQs, and pamphlets that you can download, including a guide for allies and dictionary of basic terminology. There are also local chapters where parents and allies meet and share stories and discuss different issues, like the API PFLAG in Long Beach. The first Korean parents joined the API-PFLAG group in the beginning of 2010. Another resource is [www.straightforequality.org](http://www.straightforequality.org). It is a project of PFLAG National that seeks to empower allies in supporting LGBTIQs by educating and engaging them in the pursuit of equality.

.....

If you'd like to see additional questions and answers added to this FAQ for KAs, or if you have any comments or questions about any of the questions and answers already listed, please contact [kue.info@kue-la.org](mailto:kue.info@kue-la.org). Thank you.