Same-sex romantic and sexual relationships have been around as long as people have.

But it’s only since the late nineteenth century that people have started identifying as gay, lesbian or bisexual (GLB). And then, of course, there’s the label “straight,” which more often than not, isn’t used. Why? Because everyone is assumed to be straight until proven gay, lesbian or bisexual. Some say these labels are limiting, but I think they are necessary in the world we live in.

Labels have given GLB people an identity, both politically and socially, and a way to build a supportive community in a world that is often hostile to them. By banding together under these labels, GLB people can fight discrimination and work for change. Some states have created Safe Schools Laws to protect GLB youth from discrimination and harassment because of the work of GLB people and their straight allies.

Labels can also create group pride. Twenty-year-old Pedro Pomales, of Philadelphia, PA, is proud to be a member of the GLB community. “When you first come to terms with being gay, it can be quite scary and almost unbearable, but then you realize it is who you are,” he says. “I can honestly say I am proud to be part of a group of people who fight and will continue to fight even when the odds clearly appear to be against us.”

There is still a large amount of work to be done until GLB people are treated equally in our society. Change will only come when gay, lesbian and bisexual people come together with their straight allies. Using a label like gay, lesbian or bisexual is an important part of organizing for change. In due time, I hope that no matter what label people choose, they will be safe and accepted for who they are.

You Know Gay, Straight and Bi, But What about... Heteroflexible And Pansexual?

Heteroflexible: An expression of sexual identity. For most people, this term means they are typically in a heterosexual romantic relationship but also are open to having sexual experiences or romantic relationships with persons of the same gender.

–from Sexetc.org

Pansexual: An expression of sexuality identity. Like bisexuality, but even more fluid. A pansexual person can love not only the traditional male and female genders, but also transgender and androgynous people.

–from UrbanDictionary.com

ON THE FORUMS AT SEXETC.ORG

My sexuality is never labeled. I just say I’m open. I’m never emotionally attracted to girls; it’s a purely physical attraction. But I tend to fall emotionally for guys. I don’t choose a label, because the second you want to do what YOU want to do and it doesn’t fit into [a certain category], then you get called a liar or a fake. Does anyone get what I’m saying?

–Felicia, 15, Washington, D.C.

I’m a guy. I like guys and girls, but I could only ever fall in love with a girl. My attraction to guys is physical (though obviously everything is changeable). I also imagine my future with a wife and kids and everything. But when I first told my friends, they were like, ‘You can’t be bi; you’re only physically attracted to guys’ and refused to believe me. So, now I just say I’m bi and pretend that I could love a guy.

–Robbie, 15, United Kingdom

I’m physically attracted to some girls, but I can’t picture falling in love and settling down with one. I tend to call myself bi, but I’m not really sure that I should. There’s a chance that I could fall in love with a girl, but I think it’s pretty slim. I think that “heteroflexible” is a good word I also think “pansexual” is good, since it includes people who don’t identify as male/female. But since I don’t feel that I am bisexual, I don’t really feel that I’m pansexual either.

–Indie, 19, AK

I don’t know--it’s all very confusing. I never really thought of myself as sexually confused, but looking back on everything, I guess I am.

–Erica, 16, CT