Exploring and celebrating yourself as gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, two-spirit or queer person can be a freeing experience. It is also something to be proud about!

Acknowledging and celebrating our sexual orientation and gender identity can be a unique and amazing journey. It may also present challenges at times. This awesome journey will happen over a lifetime and will be different for every person.

It will almost always include the process of coming out to ourselves and others; discovering the uniqueness of the queer community; and working through some difficult personal and social attitudes. It may influence some of our current friendships, and lead to new friendships and relationships that will last a lifetime.

The purpose of this booklet is to share information about some of the challenges, provide resources to cope, and to help remind us that we are not alone!
THE BUMPY PARTS CAN BE TOUGH.

Family, friends, culture, and religion may be really important parts of our lives, and they can influence how we feel about ourselves. Whether we know it or not, there may be times when family and peer pressures, along with negative social messages, will play a significant role in the journey. These experiences can cause some unpleasant moments along the way, and may even influence our personal decisions.

Negative messages are often the result of fears, phobias and lack of awareness which, in the case of sexual orientation and gender identity, include things like homophobia, biphobia, transphobia, and heterosexism. They can affect our well-being in several ways. What’s important to understand is that these “phobias” can influence the decisions we make, which not only affect ourselves, but others as well.
Good things happen too! Not all of our experiences will be negative. In fact, many of the messages we hear may be very positive, and many of the people in our lives may be very supportive. Learning about how homophobia, biphobia, transphobia, and heterosexism affect our health and well-being can lead to informed and healthy decisions. Being informed can positively impact our mental, physical, sexual, emotional, and spiritual selves.
Throughout this booklet, the word “queer” will be used as an umbrella term to reflect our lives as gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender and two-spirit people (GLBT). Language is powerful: words such as dyke, lesbo, fag, sissy, and queer can and have been used in hurtful ways. Today, there are many queer people who now use these, and other words in a positive way, and have redefined them to celebrate our identities and differences. Even though many of us have reclaimed some of these words, it’s not okay for anybody to use this type of language in a mean, hurtful, or hateful manner. Hate is still hate, regardless of who’s using it; and being the target of hateful or hurtful language can cause us to feel badly about who we are as queer people.

We want to encourage people to feel good about who they are. So it is important to understand that negative influences may affect our ability to see and choose positive influences.
Understanding some of the reasons why we undervalue ourselves goes a long way toward helping us embrace ourselves, and each other.
Homophobia

Homophobia is the exclusion, bullying, hatred, intolerance and ignorance of lesbian, gay, two-spirit, and queer people (and/or those perceived to be lesbian, gay, two-spirit or queer).

Forms of homophobia can be expressed within the language we use, such as statements like “that’s so gay.” It can also be found in the attitudes some people share, such as a belief that being queer is wrong, immoral or unnatural.

We might hear or read these social messages at home, on TV, in school, on the internet, or in our communities. So it’s not uncommon for those of us questioning our sexual orientation or gender to take in these negative attitudes and beliefs and start to believe them ourselves. This is called internalized homophobia. It can deeply affect our self-esteem, self-worth, the choices we make, and ultimately our goals of living a happy, healthy and productive life.
The discrimination we have experienced (at school, work, places of worship, housing complexes, hospitals, and even from law enforcement officials) can also affect our attitudes about ourselves and our right to be who we truly are. These forms of discrimination (both obvious and hidden) are known as institutionalized or systemic homophobia.

Another form of homophobia is called personal homophobia (our personal actions towards queer people). Name-calling, using hateful language and physical assault are all forms of personal homophobia. This can create a huge amount of stress and even social pressure to be homophobic ourselves, affecting our health and well-being.

**Biphobia**

Biphobia is the exclusion, bullying, hatred, intolerance and ignorance of bisexual, pansexual and two-spirit people (and/or those perceived to be bisexual, pansexual or two-spirit).

Bisexual people are often seen as invisible within the queer and heterosexual or “straight” communities because bisexuels are attracted to the individual, regardless of that person’s gender identity. Biphobia happens not only in the straight community but in the queer community as well. Bisexual people often encounter negative attitudes such as being called “fence sitters,” and are sometimes accused of being confused about their sexual orientation. In reality, the majority of us, at one or more points in our lives, have either thought about or explored our attractions and feelings for the same or another sex or gender. These feelings are normal, common, and natural.
Transphobia

Transphobia is the exclusion, bullying, hatred, intolerance and ignorance of those who identify as transgender, two-spirit, gender queer, non-binary, and gender fluid people (and/or those perceived to be transgender, two-spirit, gender queer, non binary and gender fluid).

Queer or not, anyone can be transphobic. Similar to homophobia, transphobia can present itself culturally (how society treats us), institutionally (policies or rules that discriminate against others), internally (how we feel about ourselves), and personally (our actions towards others).

Heterosexism

Like any other social prejudice, such as racism or sexism, heterosexism is the prejudiced belief that heterosexuals, or “straight” people, are socially and culturally better than queer people.

A common example of heterosexism is the assumption that everyone is straight. This often happens without even thinking about it. It might present itself in a simple way, such as asking a girl/woman if she has a “boyfriend’ or “husband” rather than a partner, significant other or spouse. The heterosexist assumption is that because she’s female she would naturally be dating a male.

If we believe that queer people are not equal or deserving of being equal, then we are engaging in heterosexism. Queer people have existed throughout history and in all cultures. Same sex sexual behaviour also exists in all forms of life
Self-acceptance of being gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, or two-spirit is a freeing, wonderful and positive experience. It can be a source of pride, celebration and dignity; some even call our sexual orientation and gender identity a gift. Homophobia, biphobia, transphobia and heterosexism can cause us a lot of stress (even in ways we are not aware of) and can affect our personal choices. Being aware of this can help us cope in ways that are healthier and less damaging to our physical, emotional, sexual, psychological and spiritual well-being.
I started high school thinking it would be different compared to middle school. But within the first few weeks, I was judged and scrutinized and I couldn’t wait ’till June. Apparently my school labeled me as queer even though I never came out, which I didn’t mind until they attacked me verbally. First it was gay, then homo. The worst for me was faggot. My peers would blame me for mistakes and humiliate me when I walked by.

I tolerated it until the day my locker was vandalized. In permanent marker were the words “YOU’RE A EMO FAG” written across my locker door. How lovely to walk into my school and see this; especially since people lined the halls snickering. I could handle the name-calling and hate towards me, but actually taking the time to trash something of mine crossed the line.

I finally went to a counsellor with a friend. We talked a lot and it felt great to get problems off my chest. (My locker was also cleaned a few days later by a janitor.) Even though I moved to a different school in grade 10 for vocational purposes, I won’t forget that sick feeling of homophobia and will not stand for it again.

- Nicole, 15
"I wouldn't change even if I could because there isn't anything wrong with me."
Sexual Orientation & Identity

Sexual orientation is about who we are attracted to physically, emotionally and sexually. There are many kinds of attractions we can have for one another. Sometimes our attractions do not necessarily reflect how we identify ourselves. For example: a man might call himself gay but is occasionally attracted to a woman; a woman may call herself a lesbian but is occasionally attracted to men. It does not mean that we have to, or will, act on those attractions. But if we do decide to act on our attractions, it does not change who we are, or how we identify ourselves.
It is a personal decision how we identify ourselves (gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, two-spirit or straight) and who we decide to be intimate or have sex with.

**Sexual Expressions**

Sometimes our sexual orientation identity is different than how we express our sexuality. For example, because of homophobia, biphobia, transphobia, and heterosexism, a person may decide not to “come out” even though they are sexually active with someone of the same sex/gender (discreetly or openly). It’s important to respect others’ decisions not to come out because we may not be fully aware of the reasons why they can’t come out.

**Sexual Health and Safety**

When, and if we decide to be sexually active, knowing about safer sex, HIV and other sexually transmitted infections and unintended pregnancies is important.

It’s important to think about your own sexual boundaries, what you want to do and not do, and get an idea of what the risks are before you make a decision in the heat of the moment.
You can have sex with little or no risk of passing on or getting HIV. This is called safer sex. Safer sex also helps protect you and your partners) from other STIs, such as gonorrhea and syphilis.

People can have HIV or other STIs without knowing it because these infections often do not cause symptoms. You could have HIV or another STI and not know it. Also, don’t assume that your partner(s) knows whether they have HIV or any other STI. The only way to know for sure is to be tested.

Try to use barriers to protect yourself during sex, such as internal or external condoms and oral sex dams.

Other safety issues can also occur as a result of engaging in sex with others, such as emotional and physical harm. Try to make sure that you have access to a social and/or support network, like a buddy or counsellor, in case something unexpected happens and you need help or information. You can refer to the *Reach Out* section at the back of this booklet for suggestions.

**All About Gender: Roles, Identity and Expression**

We live in a society that generally acknowledges only two distinct genders, male and female. This is known as the gender binary, and this binary leaves little room for people to openly express their gender in a way that feels right for them. Gender is also a socially constructed concept or idea of what is male or masculine, and what is female or feminine (e.g. blue for boys and pink for girls).
Gender roles refer to the roles that society assigns as appropriate for women or men. For example, the expectation that women raise children and men make money.

Our gender identity is how we personally choose to identify ourselves – male, female or transgender.

Some of us have an appearance, or gender expression, that is perhaps different than society’s expectation (e.g. a woman who appears to be more masculine or a man who appears to be more feminine). We have been bullied, excluded, alienated and at worst, abused or treated violently because of it. It’s important for everyone, queer or straight, to acknowledge and celebrate all gender journeys.

We’re a multifaceted community that expands beyond society’s gender expectations. Our self-determined gender is what we personally make it: emotionally, psychologically, and even physically. Our individuality is our very own, not on what society expects us to be. Our gender identity and gender expression are our decisions alone.
Some people feel that gender is more than being masculine, feminine, male or female, and that society places too many restrictions on gender identity. Some identify themselves as being genderqueer which embraces all possibilities and challenges society’s rigid gender norms.
THE TRANSGENDER JOURNEY

Being transgender, or trans, can be doubly difficult because under the queer umbrella, trans people are seen as a minority group within another minority group. Throughout the life-journey (which is determined by each trans person), know there are social supports should you need them. Reaching out to these supports such as counsellors and other community care providers can help assist in the transition process. Some of these supports can be found in the Reach Out section at the back of the booklet.

Beware the Quick Fix

Understandably, some trans individuals want to transition quickly in order to live as their true self. The sense of urgency to transition may cause some people to make decisions they may not make otherwise. For example, the journey of transitioning can be a long, costly and difficult process. It may cause people to look for alternate routes like ordering hormones off the internet rather than working with a healthcare team. Some people may also be forced to share needles to inject hormones. This increases the chances of getting or passing blood borne infections.
Hormone purchases off the internet as a “quick fix,” may be unsafe. There can also be serious and long-term negative health effects when using hormones not prescribed by a specialist.

Ideally, the process of administering hormones, whether it be in the form of pills, patches, gels or injectable hormones should be in consultation with a qualified health care practitioner. This helps lower the risk of something negative happening to your health and well-being.

If choosing to inject with hormones, HIV and hepatitis C can be passed on through shared needles. Sharing needles increases your risk to infections like HIV and hepatitis C. Use new needles and supplies any time you inject.

*Try to avoid sharing equipment for injecting hormones, even with sex partners.*

Social supports are also available for friends and family who may want to gain more knowledge and understanding. Whether the transition includes a name or pronoun change, hormone therapy, or any kind of body change, only that transgender person should determine what that transition looks like and what feels most comfortable.
When I was fifteen, I admitted to myself that I was a transwoman. Seeking support, I came out to people I considered the closest of friends. One friend cut off all contact, saying that his parents wouldn’t like it if they found out about me. Another wanted me to talk with a pastor, to try to see that what I wanted was sick and immoral.

I felt betrayed, nearly worthless and believed it was my fault. I felt if I could convince myself not to be who I was, I would get my friends back, and everything would be okay again.

Any negative experience, even a single small one, overrode the countless positive ones. The phobia that shaped others’ way of thinking began to affect mine. I worried that someone would take it a step further than simply not wanting me in their life anymore.

Much later, I realized that I couldn’t let others’ fears and bigotry make me afraid of being myself. I still bear emotional scars formed by years of fear; they will never go away. I can only live and hope for a time when others won’t have to suffer the same hurt.

Jennifer Stien, 17
The term “coming out” means the lifelong process and journey of accepting ourselves as queer, and revealing our sexual orientation and/or gender identity to others. It is likely to happen over a lifetime because of heterosexist or gender assumptions made by some people (i.e. everyone is straight or there are no transgender people around me).

Coming out is something that many of us are constantly thinking about, especially when it comes to dealing with friends, family, teachers, religious leaders, or others who are important to us. It is our personal decision to either come out, or not, and there is no right or wrong way to do so. It’s also a personal decision as to when we come out, who we come out to, or even who we decide not to come out to.
Liberating, but Scary too

Many of us feel a weight lift off our shoulders once we come out to ourselves and when we come out to others. After we come out, we typically search for those who are also queer and will listen to us, hang out with us, or can help answer our questions.

There are also big challenges and important things to consider. Some of us don’t have, or can’t find, others to connect with because we live in a smaller community, don’t have access to transportation, or don’t have Internet access. We may experience pressure from our cultural and religious institutions. There may be fear that someone will tell others about our sexual orientation and/or gender identity (also called being “outed”) when we are not ready. There can be additional stressors while coming out such as racism, poverty, homelessness, and addiction.

The decision to come out to another person is entirely up to you. Consider and plan ahead whether you might have your personal safety threatened, or lose access to your home before you disclose to others. You may also want to consider a self-care plan to reduce stress if you receive a negative reaction.
Dealing with Issues

The challenges and issues we face being queer can lead to increased feelings of depression and isolation, and unhealthy ways to cope with the stress. It can possibly lead to excessive drinking, drug use and smoking. We may even have thoughts about suicide or hurting ourselves, such as self-harm through cutting. **What’s important to know is that even in the most stressful and painful times, things can and do change for the better. Supportive people such as a friend, teacher, or counsellor are helpful.** We may not see it at the time, but those who have experienced these feelings have looked back and recognized that those periods of stress were temporary.

**Look Here**

There are queer and queer-friendly community organizations with supportive people who can provide options and help answer questions about your personal challenges. These include toll-free numbers if you live in a rural community.

See the *Reach Out* section at the back of this booklet to access them.
I’m only 21, but I already feel like I’ve grown and experienced so much. The process of coming out was an evolution that continued long after the words “I’m gay” left my lips. Coming out was the easy part; it’s everything that happened after that was complicated.

All I wanted to do was connect with other people like me, make new friends, and form new relationships. I found myself willing to conform and sacrifice who I was to fit in. It was a time of reckless immaturity and broken hearts. Every relationship was a serious one, and every breakup was devastating.

Now I know I’m not alone in how I felt because I see it happening all the time. It’s so easy to fall in with the wrong crowd and get trapped in the world of sex, drugs and disco. It’s much harder to realize that it’s happened. My biggest regret was that I let the relationships with my real friends suffer, to focus only on my gay friendships because I thought it would make me happier.

- Jeffrey, 21
Our Inner Circle

Family, friends and our feelings about it

Homophobia, biphobia, transphobia, and heterosexism are all part of the less pleasant stuff, which can negatively affect our lives in ways we may not even be aware of. But to feel good about ourselves, sometimes we have to “dig up the dirt” and face it to begin to deal with it. So let’s look together at some of the other issues.

Rejection

Rejection by our friends, family, teachers, work environments and religious institutions can be devastating. Of course they can affect us emotionally, mentally, physically and psychologically.

When we feel crappy about who we are, we sometimes make unhealthy decisions about how we treat ourselves. This can directly impact our overall health and well-being.
Another area that can directly impact our health is seeing a doctor. If we don’t feel safe or comfortable coming out to our doctors – or nurses or counsellors – we may not be given correct or enough information about our health needs. This can also affect our emotional and psychological state of mind. If you experience a negative reaction, try asking around for names of queer friendly health providers.

You are not alone!

As queer people, we are diverse. We encompass all ages, beliefs, abilities, races, shapes, sizes, ethnicities and cultural backgrounds. However, we share the common bond of understanding how complex it is to come out, and figure out how we fit into society.

Negative Feelings

Because we’re often confronted with negative stereotypes and attitudes (socially, in the media etc.) many of us have experienced feelings of isolation, depression, invisibility, worthlessness, hopelessness, shame and guilt. These feelings may affect us so deeply that we may make uninformed, misguided and unhealthy decisions.
When we reach a highly emotional and stressed state of mind, and life feels like it’s too much to handle, we can simply end up not caring about ourselves. And that’s what can often lead us to unhealthy choices. Our negative actions can impact others as well, sometimes in ways we aren’t even aware of.

**Talk About It**

Talk about how you feel to people who are there to listen, who understand and are supportive – see the *Reach Out* section at the back of this booklet.

Our common bond as queer people is that we have managed to exist over the centuries in spite of many efforts to exclude and remove us from society.

**Gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and two-spirit people share a history of being an incredibly strong and resilient community.** While we may not always recognize one another, our contributions are vast and invaluable.

We are everywhere!
MARK’S STORY

I was outed after my mother read my emails on the computer. This was the beginning of grade eleven; a year after I had come out as trans to my best friends and began living as male. Now my mother, and other parents and guardians, decided my gender identity was to be taken away and forgotten. Forced into a female role and wardrobe, I could not voice any protest, lest I be abandoned.

This led me to a life of intoxicants and nights out, dangerous situations and addictive materials. I began to experiment with drugs, alcohol and self-harm, leaving scars and dependencies.

I knew eventually that I had to leave my home. When my parents evicted me, surprisingly, my grandparents took me in. I could be myself any way I needed to be and saw that they would always support and love me.

It feels great to be able to be myself again, and be accepted. I am now seeing a gender therapist. I’ve made real friends and feel respected and loved, a feeling I never thought I could have being transgender. Knowing how to fight for the right to be me was the key component that led to the life I have now.

- Mark, 17
Most people’s view of body image is a direct result of society’s sexist beliefs, which categorize people based on their birth sex and gender identity. Our commonly accepted “ideal body type” is moulded through the promotion of gender stereotypes, such as what males and females should look like and do, according to their biological sex.

We often see this in commercial advertising, where we are bombarded by what society deems the “ideal” body image (typically tall, thin or athletic, toned, with lighter features). As a result, knowingly or not, many of us may strive for this body image to achieve what society thinks is “attractive.”
“Attractive people” come in \textit{ALL} body shapes, sizes and ethnicities. Unfortunately, we aren’t always taught this. In fact, we are often influenced to believe attraction should be based solely on our appearance rather than what counts most - who we are as individuals.

Sexism applies not just to women, but men’s bodies too, especially in the gay community. For example, in queer media, “desirable” gay men are usually portrayed as tall, young, muscular, Caucasian and tanned.

This does not reflect the real population of gay men, who are all body shapes and ethnicities, all of which are attractive and desirable.
Some of us may feel that body image is important as we sort through the queer community trying to find potential girlfriends, boyfriends, sexual hook-ups and friendships. Our obsessions with body image may lead to unhealthy habits to achieve that body. A chiselled body doesn’t always mean that it’s a healthy body, and carrying a bit of extra body weight doesn’t always indicate an unhealthy body.

Body obsession also makes us shallow in how we view ourselves and others. Limited and often unrealistic expectations may lead to isolation and depression, and a feeling that we will never be good enough, either physically or emotionally.

**Finding Balance**

It’s important to be aware that social messages can affect how we value and see our own bodies and how we value and see others’ bodies. Counsellors and peer supports can help us explore our challenges with body image.
When I told my best friend that I liked girls and boys and that God doesn’t make mistakes, she said, “How do you know that God created you?”

I felt scared that I was evil and bad, even though I went to church every Sunday. I was scared to tell my parents because I didn’t want them to think I was bad too. But one day, one of my teachers came up to me and said that I had a lot of courage and wished that other kids would be just as honest about themselves. From then on, I spoke up even though other kids put me down. I spoke up when I was called a lesbo. I spoke up when it was written on the chalkboard that I was a homo.

I knew that I wasn’t the first, nor would I be the last, so hopefully I made a difference.

- Karen, 16
When seeking a health care professional, it’s important to find one who will treat you with dignity and respect you for who you are. If you don’t feel comfortable with a particular doctor or counsellor, you don’t have to keep seeing them, and you don’t have to explain why. Sometimes you have to see a few different people before you find the one you are most comfortable with.
Here are some tips for determining whether a health care professional is open and affirming of queer identities:

• At a clinic or counselling office, look around for posters, stickers and pamphlets that reflect the lives of queer people, such as a rainbow sticker or queer magazine.

• If you are required to fill out any forms, notice whether the wording on the form identifies different genders (male, female, transgender), or assumes you have both a mother and father.

• When speaking with the health care professional, notice the words they use during your conversation. Do they make assumptions about whether you have a boyfriend or girlfriend? Do they make assumptions about your sexual orientation or gender identity?

• Ask whether they have had any queer clients in the past, and have them tell you how many queer clients they have seen.
Be True To Who You Are.

It is our decision how we live our lives despite others’ views about us. Know your boundaries, be honest with yourself, love yourself, accept yourself and celebrate yourself. Denying who we are can be a roadblock to our happiness and fulfillment.

The process of coming out is a lifelong journey. We are the ones who decide when and whom to come out to. Depending on the situation, this life process takes not only patience, but information and support from friends and allies.
Take Care of Yourself.

The pressures and stress around us may impact our ability to cope in a healthier and constructive manner. As a result, we may choose to cope by drinking more alcohol, smoking more cigarettes, having unsafe sex, or taking drugs rather than exploring the issues that affect us. Knowing and acknowledging our struggles, and making a plan for dealing with these struggles, is the first step to living well and living healthier.

If you are in a low period or depressed, it’s important to practice self-care, such as eating healthier foods, getting more sleep, seeking supports such as counselling, and being physically active.

Make Informed Decisions.

Gather as much information as you can before making decisions about your body including whether or not to be sexually active or when considering making changes to your body.

Use Community Supports.

They are here to help. Check the Reach Out section in the back of this booklet for local community health centres and queer-friendly resource centres. They are available to answer your questions, or refer you to other more specialized services. If you live in an isolated or rural community, several agencies have toll-free phone numbers that you can use.
You are not alone. You live under a diverse queer umbrella that includes people from all walks of life, of all ages, from all cultures, heritages and religions, and who work in all occupational fields. At times you might wonder where all the queer people are, but the fact is we are everywhere.

It’s so important that we see and value ourselves in positive ways and to choose positive coping methods over negative ones. The better we cope, the stronger we will be – mentally, emotionally, physically, and spiritually.
Reach Out

National Resources

**CATIE**
Canada’s source for HIV and hepatitis C information
Toll Free: 1-800-263-1638
www.catie.ca

**Action Canada for Sexual Health & Rights**
Progressive, pro-choice organization advancing and upholding sexual and reproductive health and rights in Canada and globally.
www.sexualhealthandrights.ca

**Canadian Rainbow Health Coalition**
The Canadian Rainbow Health Coalition (CRHC) is a national organization whose objective is to address the various health and wellness issues that people who have sexual and emotional relationships with people of the same gender, or a gender identity that does not conform to the identity assigned to them at birth, encounter.
Toll Free: 1-800-955-5129
www.rainbowhealth.ca

**EGALE**
Egale Canada is a national organization committed to advancing equality and justice for lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans-identified people, and their families, across Canada.
Toll Free: 1-888-204-7777
www.egale.ca
PFLAG
PFLAG Canada is a national organization that helps all Canadians who are struggling with issues of sexual orientation and gender identity. PFLAG Canada supports, educates and provides resources to parents, families, friends and colleagues with questions or concerns.
Toll Free: 1-888-530-6777 (English)
Toll Free: 1-888-530-6483 (French)
www.pflagcanada.ca

Public Health Agency of Canada
Sexual Health and Sexually Transmitted Infections
www.publichealth.gc.ca/sti

Sex Information and Education Council of Canada (SIECCAN)
A national organization that fosters professional education and public knowledge about sexuality and sexual health.
www.sieccan.org

Sexuality and U
www.sexualityandu.ca is committed to providing credible and up-to-date information and education on sexual health.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Rainbow Resource Centre would like to acknowledge the contributions of the following individuals, organizations, and businesses:

Author: Reece Malone
Illustrations: Leticia Spence
Design: Blindside Creative
Photography: Daryl Malone Photography
Editor: Oya Creative

A big thank you to the Rainbow Resource Centre’s Youth Group and Peer Project 4 Youth. Without your input, this booklet would not be possible. It is our hope that we were able to reflect your experiences.

Thank you to Shelly Smith for supervisory support, and to all the editors, contributors, and models for taking the time to participate in the development of this booklet.

Need more information and resources on HIV or hepatitis C?

Contact CATIE:
1-800-263-1638
info@catie.ca
www.catie.ca

CATIE Ordering Centre Catalogue Number: ATI-26356
(aussi disponible en français, ATI-26357)

Updated and printed with assistance from CATIE, 2016.
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