

Coming Out**

For lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people, coming out is a process of understanding, accepting, and valuing one's sexual orientation/identity. Coming out includes both exploring one's identity and sharing that identity with others. It also involves coping with societal responses and attitudes toward LGBT people. LGBT individuals are forced to come to terms with what it means to be different in a society that tends to assume everyone to be heterosexual and that tends to judge differences from the norm in negative ways. The coming out process is very personal. This process happens in different ways and occurs at different ages for different people. Some people are aware of their sexual identity at an early age; others arrive at this awareness only after many years. Coming out is a continuing, sometimes lifelong, process.

While some anxiety related to sexuality is common among college students, the problems facing LGBT people are often more difficult than those facing others. Because positive role models are often difficult to identify, LGBT people may feel alone and unsure of their own sexual identities. Fear of rejection is greater among LGBT people due to the prejudices in society against them.

Coming Out to Oneself

Recognizing your own sexual identity and working toward self-acceptance are the first steps in coming out. First, concerning sexual identity, it helps to think of a sexual orientation continuum that ranges from exclusive same-sex attraction to exclusive opposite-sex attraction. Exploring your sexual identity may include determining where you presently fit along that continuum.

Concerning self-acceptance, it can be very helpful to focus on the positive aspects of LGBT culture, for example, its music, art, theater, books, events, and groups. It is also very helpful to seek out positive, well adjusted and comfortable role models among LGBT people. Building on the positive does not mean that you pretend that our society is past its discrimination, fears, and negative myths concerning LGBT people, or that these things do not have any effects on LGBT people. However, these negative things are better understood as externally based rather than inherent to your identity or your orientation. Part of developing a positive sense of self is understanding that your own homophobia is also externally based, the product of societal prejudices and anti-LGBT biases that have impinged upon you for much of your life.

There are many things to think about when considering coming out. Some of the positive outcomes may be increased self-esteem, greater honesty in one's life, and a sense of greater personal integrity. In addition, there is often a sense of relief and a reduction of tension when one stops trying to deny or hide such an important part of his/her life. Coming out can lead to greater freedom of self-expression, a positive sense of self, and more healthy and honest relationships.

One safe means of beginning to come out to yourself is through reading about how others have dealt with similar issues. There are many books and periodicals available on all facets of LGBT life, from clinical studies on LGBT people to collections of coming out stories.

Coming Out to Other Lesbians and Gay Men

Often, after spending some time getting in touch with one's own feelings, the next step is to come out to others. It is usually advisable to come out first to those who are most likely to be supportive. LGBT people are a potential natural support system because they have all experienced at least some of the steps in the process of coming out. Sharing experiences about being gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender can help you decrease feelings of isolation and shame. Furthermore, coming out to other LGBT people can help you build a community of people who can then support and assist you in coming out to others in your life. Many LGBT communities offer a number of helpful resources, including local coming out groups, switchboards, social outlets, and political and cultural activities and organizations.

Coming out to other LGBT people does not need to happen quickly. Also, choosing to do so does not mean that you must conform to real or presumed expectations of the LGBT community. What is most important is that you seek your own path through the coming out process and that you attend to your unique, personal timetable. You should not allow yourself to be pressured into anything you are not ready for or don't want to do. It is important to proceed at your own pace, being honest with yourself and taking time to discover who you really are.

Coming Out to Heterosexuals

Perhaps your most difficult step in coming out will be to reveal yourself to heterosexuals. It is at this step that you may feel most likely to encounter negative consequences. Thus it is particularly important to go into this part of the coming out process with open eyes. For example, it will help to understand that some heterosexuals will be shocked or confused initially, and that they may need some time to get used to the idea that you are LGBT. Also, it is possible that some heterosexual family members or friends may reject you initially. However, do not consider them as hopeless; many people come around in their own time.

Loss of employment or housing are also possibilities that some LGBT people face. In some places it is still legal to discriminate against LGBT individuals for housing, employment and other issues. You should take this into consideration when deciding to whom and where you come out.

Coming out to others is likely to be a more positive experience when you are more secure and comfortable with your sexuality, and less reliant on others for your positive self-concept. The necessary clarification of feelings is a process that usually takes place over time. It may be a good idea to work through that process before you take the actual steps of disclosing your sexual orientation. Usually it is not a good idea to come out on the spur of the moment. Make coming out an action, not a reaction.

In coming out to others, consider the following:

- Think about what you want to say and choose the time and place carefully.
- Be aware of what the other person is going through. The best time for you might not be the best time for someone else.
- Present yourself honestly and remind the other person that you are the same individual you were yesterday.
- Be prepared for an initially negative reaction from some people. Do not forget that it took time for you to come to terms with your sexuality, and that it is important to give others the time they need.
- Have friends lined up to talk with you later about what happened.
- Don't give up hope if you don't initially get the reaction you wanted. Due to inculcated societal prejudices mentioned earlier, some people need more time than others to come to terms with what they have heard.

Above all, be careful not to let your self-esteem depend entirely on the approval of others. If a person rejects you and refuses to try to work on acceptance, that's not your fault. Keep in mind that this initial refusal may get reversed once the individual gets used to the idea that you are LGBT. If time does not seem to change the individual's attitude toward you, then you may want to re-evaluate your relationship and its importance to you. Remember that you have the right to be who you are, you have the right to be out and open about all important aspects of your identity including your sexual orientation, and in no case is another person's rejection evidence of your lack of worth or value.

Summary

The decision to come out is always personal. Whether to come out, and, if so, when, where, how, and to whom are all questions you must answer for yourself. Taking control of this process includes being aware in advance of potential ramifications so that you can act positively rather than defensively. Coming out may be one of the most difficult tasks you confront in your life, but it can also be one of the most rewarding. Coming out is one way of affirming your dignity and the dignity of other LGBT people. Remember that you are not alone; there is a strong LGBT community waiting to be explored, and more heterosexual allies are willing to offer their support than you might have first imagined.

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