

## Information for Students about Coming Out to Family

### KNOWING WHAT TO EXPECT

#### Most Follow Typical Stages

The purpose of this is to inform gay and lesbian young adults about the process most parents go through when their child's homosexual orientation is disclosed.

The stages to be explained are: shock, denial, guilt, expression of feelings, personal decision-making, true acceptance.

The process assumes that you have wrestled with the issue of whether or not to come out to your parents and that your decision is affirmative. The approach and suggestions offered in the following are based on the assumption that you suspect one or both of your parents will be understanding, if not supportive, given adequate time.

This pamphlet may not be helpful if you have serious reservations about their ability to cope and you suspect they could sever their relationship with you.

#### They Go Through Stages Differently

A caution: Each family is unique. Although most are likely to follow the stages outlined here, allow some latitude for your own parents. The illustrations and suggestions given here will be drawn from conversations with parents who have attended the Philadelphia Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays meetings.

Few parents are "model" cases that perfectly fit the following description. Knowing what to anticipate and how to respond in a helpful way will enable you to take the big step with some degree of knowledge and support.

### QUESTIONS TO ASK YOURSELF

#### Be Clear in Your Own Mind

- *Are you sure about your sexual orientation?* Don't raise the issue unless you're able to respond with confidence to the question "Are you sure?" Confusion on your part will increase your parents' confusion and decrease their confidence in your judgment.
- *Are you comfortable with your gay sexuality?* If you're wrestling with guilt and periods of depression, you'll be better off waiting to tell your parents. Coming out to them may require tremendous energy on your part; it will require a reserve of positive self-image.
- *Do you have support?* In the event your parents' reaction devastates you, there should be someone or a group that you can confidently turn to for emotional

support and strength. Maintaining your sense of self-worth is critical.

- *Are you knowledgeable about homosexuality?* Your parents will probably respond based on a lifetime of information from a homophobic society. If you've done some serious reading on the subject, you'll be able to assist them by sharing reliable information and research.
- *What's the emotional climate at home?* If you have the choice of when to tell, consider the timing. Choose a time when they're not dealing with such matters as the death of a close friend, pending surgery or the loss of a job.
- *Can you be patient?* Your parents will require time to deal with this information if they haven't considered it prior to your sharing. The process may last from six months to two years.
- *What's your motive for coming out now?* Hopefully, it is because you love them and are uncomfortable with the distance you feel. Never come out in anger or during an argument, using your sexuality as a weapon.
- *Do you have available resources?* Homosexuality is a subject most non-gay people know little about. Have available at least one of the following: a book addressed to parents, a contact for the local or national Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays, the name of a non-gay counselor who can deal fairly with the issue.
- *Are you financially dependent on your parents?* If you suspect they are capable of withdrawing college finances or forcing you out of the house, you may choose to wait until they do not have this weapon to hold over you.
- *What is your general relationship with your parents?* If you've gotten along well and have always known their love -- and shared your love for them in return -- chances are they'll be able to deal with the issue in a positive way.
- *What is their moral societal view?* If they tend to see social issues in clear terms of good/bad or holy/sinful, you may anticipate that they will have serious problems dealing with your sexuality. If, however, they've evidenced a degree of flexibility when dealing with other changing societal matters, you may be able to anticipate a willingness to work this through with you.
- *Is this your decision?* Not everyone should come out to their parents. Don't be pressured into it if you're not sure you'll be better off by doing so -- no matter what their response.

## **THEY'LL EXPERIENCE LOSS**

### **Parents and Children Switch Roles**

When you come out to your parents, you may find your parent-child roles reversed for a while. They will need to learn from your experience. As your parents deal with your disclosure, you must assume the "parenting" role by allowing them time to express their feelings and make progress toward new insights.

This will not be easy. You'll want them to understand and grasp this important part of your life right away.

It will be easy for you to become impatient. You'll need to repeat many of the same things. Just because you've explained something once does not mean they heard it. Their understanding will evolve slowly -- painfully slowly -- at the beginning. Their emotional reactions will get in the way of their intellectual understandings.

Allow them time and space. Consider your own journey; you've been working on this issue for years! Although the issues your parents will work through are similar to those you've dealt with, the difference is that you're ahead of them in the process. Be patient.

### **Separation And Loss**

Many families take the news as a temporary loss -- almost as a death -- of the son or daughter they have known and loved. Elizabeth Kubler-Ross describes the stages related to the death of a loved one as denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance. Just as in grief, the first reaction of parents of gays and lesbians centers around separation and loss.

I remember one morning when my son was fixing breakfast at the stove, as I sat at the kitchen table reading the newspaper. I looked at him and wanted to say, "I don't know who you are, but I wish you'd leave and send my son Ted back."

Parents experience loss when their child comes out, but it probably will be only temporary.

### **Not An Absolute Progression**

Although the stages described here apply to most people, they are not an absolute progression for everyone. Sometimes a stage occurs out of order; occasionally one is skipped. Some progress through the stages in three months, others take years.

A few -- often due to self-pity -- make no progress at all. In any case, the initial feeling is usually one of loss.

Most parents think they know and understand their children from the day of their birth. Even though they cling to old stories -- and sometimes evidence confusion in telling some of them -- most remain confident that they know what's going on inside a child.

They lose the perception they once had of their child and don't yet know if they will like the real person who is replacing that idea. Those who experience the biggest shock when their child comes out probably are those who suffer the greatest feeling of loss and rejection.

It's not that they separate from the child as much as it is that they feel their child has willfully separated from them.

### **A Traumatic Discovery**

They sense the separation -- which you've probably been aware of for years -- for the first time. It's a traumatic discovery. With understanding and patience from all parties, that relationship can be restored. In fact, in most cases it improves because it's based on mutual honesty.

### **STAGE 1: SHOCK**

#### **If They Have No Idea About You**

An initial state of shock can be anticipated if you suspect that your parents have no idea what you're about to share. It may last anywhere from ten minutes to a week; usually it wears off in a few days. Shock is a natural reaction that we all experience (and need for a while) to avoid acute distress and unpleasantness.

Explain that you haven't been able to be completely honest with them and you don't like the distance that has occurred over the years. Affirm your love for them. Say it more than once. Although they may not initially respond positively to your profession of love, it will penetrate in the hours when they are alone and thinking about it.

Remind them that you are the same person today that you were yesterday: "You loved me yesterday, before I told; I haven't changed since then. I'm the same person today that I was yesterday."

#### **Some Parents Already Know**

Occasionally, a parent will experience no shock at all: "I always knew you were different; I considered this as a possibility. It's O.K. I love you. You'll have to help me understand and accept the reality."

Sometimes they say, "We'd known for a long time because of a letter you left on the table last summer; we've been waiting for you to tell us." In these instances your task will be considerably easier, as they've already worked through some of the stages on their own.

## **STAGE 2: DENIAL**

### **A Shield from Threat**

Denial helps to shield a person from a threatening or painful message. It is different from shock because it indicates the person has heard the message and is attempting to build a defense mechanism to ward it off.

Denial responses take many forms: hostility ("No son of mine is going to be queer."), non-registering ("That's nice, dear, what do you want for dinner?"), non-caring ("If you choose that lifestyle, I don't want to hear about it."), or rejection ("It's just a phase; you'll get over it.").

Their perception of your homosexual orientation will be distorted by the messages they've received and accepted from our homophobic society. The manner in which the denial is expressed can range from a serene trance to hysterical crying or shouting. Many parents take a middle-of-the-road approach; they cry frequently.

### **We Thought He Was Confused**

My wife and I were sure that our son had been caught up in some form of gay liberation activity that appealed to him because it seemed dangerous and exciting. We thought the media coverage about homosexuality probably attracted him and that he lacked maturity to know what he really wanted.

We insisted that he go once to a psychiatrist to deal with the anger that had been building for over a year. We agreed to visit the doctor, too, in a separate session. After two or three visits by Ted, the psychiatrist shredded our defense mechanism of denial: "I've counseled many gay young adults and I'm convinced that this is no passing fancy; to the best of my knowledge, your son is gay."

### **If They Want Counseling For You**

You might be ready to suggest the name of a counselor or two if your parents think that counseling will help to clarify their confusion. It would be advisable to suggest a non-gay person, because your parents will want an "unbiased" view.

If they press for you to see a counselor, suggest that they match you session-for-session. They may resist on the grounds that they don't need help; underneath, however, they'll probably welcome someone to talk to.

Your parents may need some help in separating what's "normal" from the "norm." It's probable that they'll think homosexuality is not normal. You can help them by explaining that although homosexuality is not the norm, it is what is natural to you. Point out that all of creation has exceptions to the norm; while most people are right-handed, some are left-handed; although most people have two eyes of the same color, some have a different color in each eye.

They need to begin to understand that although your sexual orientation is not in the norm, it is a natural and honest response for you.

### **Breaking Through Denial**

If their denial takes the form of "I don't want to talk about it," you should take a gentle and cautious initiative if they haven't changed in about a week. Gently raise the subject when they appear relaxed: "Dad, I've been wanting to talk to you about this for years; please don't push me out of your life. I can no longer bear the burden of lying to you. I love you and want you to continue to love me in return." Personalize your message as a way of penetrating their defense.

There's no need to tell them more than what they ask. Volunteering information about experiences will make them build stronger defenses. Answer only what they ask for; they'll get to other questions at another time. Because they'll experience awkwardness in framing their questions, you may need to clarify the question before providing a response.

### **One Parent May Be Slower**

Be ready to deal with your parents individually, if necessary. Most couples react to this disclosure as they have to other shocks; one takes the lead and moves toward resolution ahead of the other. Don't be upset with the slower of the two.

It is not infrequent that couples have dysfunction in their own relationship when this occurs. The one who seems to adapt more quickly may suggest that his/her spouse is actually enjoying the agonizing; the one who moves more slowly may think the other is far too accepting of the situation.

Parents who move at different rates may experience tension, whether expressed or unspoken.

## **STAGE 3: GUILT**

### **They'll Feel They've Done Wrong**

Most people who deal with homosexuality initially perceive it as a "problem" and ask: "What causes it?" They think if they can locate a cause, then a cure is not far behind.

For me, the question became introspective: "What did I do wrong?" Whether I viewed the cause as genetic or environmental, I was clearly to blame. I questioned the kind of male role model I had provided; I examined my masculinity.

For a while, no matter which angle I viewed the situation from, I believed I was the primary source of the problem. It was a feeling I was too ashamed and saddened to share with anyone else. Although both parents usually feel guilty, the parent who is the same gender as the child probably feels it more.

Then one day, my wife said: "I don't think it's reasonable for you to take the blame; you raised two sons, one gay and one straight. There must be other factors involved."

### **Single Parents Feel Extra Blame**

It's not uncommon for single parents to heap extra blame on themselves because of an earlier loss, separation or divorce from their spouse: "I knew I failed you; I just couldn't be both mother and father at the same time."

When parents feel guilty, they are self-centered. They are not yet concerned with what you've been through; in this stage they're too wrapped up in themselves to attend to your concerns.

Because they are your parents, they may not be able to admit to you their sense of guilt. To acknowledge that feeling to you is like saying, "I've brought this horrible thing to you; I've made you different. Blame me." That's not a comfortable position for parents to assume.

### **Tell Them It's Not Their Fault**

You can help them in a variety of ways. Assure them that you don't believe the cause is as simple as they see it. Tell them that there are many theories and that the origins of homosexuality are not known.

Provide them with a book to read that is addressed to parents (an excellent paperback is "Now That You Know; What Every Parent Should Know About Homosexuality," by Fairchild and Hayward; Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1979). A book may appeal to them at this point because it can be viewed as an authority. Have the book ready to give them; don't send them to a gay bookstore to find it for themselves.

They may be ready to talk to a trusted friend now; some may seek out a clergy person. It will be difficult for you to attempt to steer them away from a person of their choosing who you think may not be helpful. If you know an agency that has assisted other families in a helpful way, have the agency name ready.

A gay-oriented agency may be able to help them, but they'll resist going to the "enemy camp" for help. Provide the phone number of the local Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays or give them the name of some other parents who've agreed in advance to talk to them. Don't expect them to respond immediately to these suggestions; their shame and guilt may hold them back. Providing this information is like planting a seed that may take time to bear fruit.

## **STAGE 4: FEELINGS EXPRESSED**

### **They Acknowledge Their Emotions**

When it's clear that guilt and self-incrimination are unproductive, parents are ready to ask questions, listen to answers and acknowledge their feelings. This is the point at

which some of the most productive dialogue between you and your parents will take place.

Now will pour forth the full range of feelings: "I'm disappointed that I won't have any grandchildren." "Please don't tell anyone in the family; I'm not ready to face this issue with anyone else." "I feel so alone and hurt; I believe I was better off not knowing" "How can you hurt us this way?" "I wish I were dead."

Since living in a homophobic society has forced you to experience many of the same feelings (isolation, fear of rejection, hurt, confusion, fear of the future, etc.), you can share with them the similarities in the feelings you have experienced.

However, allow them ample time to express themselves; don't let your needs overpower theirs. If they haven't read a book or talked to other parents, suggest again that they pursue one of those avenues. Offer to read and discuss a chapter in the book with them or to go to a parents' meeting with them.

### **Anger And Hurt**

Our son Ted had cautiously suggested earlier that we meet his lover Dan. Initially, we had no interest in that suggestion because when we stopped blaming ourselves for what had happened, we began blaming Dan. I was angry that this catastrophe had befallen our home; was sure it was going to ruin our lives. I had always felt we were good parents, hardly deserving of this. My anger toward Ted was seldom expressed to him, but it was there for me to deal with.

Anger and hurt are probably the most frequently expressed feelings. They are often surface feelings that seem spiteful and cruel. In order for your parents to make progress it is better that they say them than bury them and attempt to deny their existence. They will be hard for you to handle. You may be tempted to withdraw, regretting that you ever opened this issue.

Hang in there, however; there's no turning back now. When they begin to express these feelings they're on the road to recovery.

## **STAGE 5: MAKING DECISIONS**

### **The Fork in the Road**

As the emotional trauma subsides, your parents will increasingly deal more rationally with the issue. It's common at this point for them to retreat for a while and consider the options that lie ahead.

It's like reaching a fork in the road that has a number of paths from which to choose. The choice each person makes is a reflection of the attitude he or she is ready to adopt in dealing with the situation.

Both parents may not necessarily choose to take the same path. A number of factors will influence which path is chosen. Reading about homosexuality and talking to other

parents will probably encourage them to take a more supportive position. Their religious orientation will play an important part. The general liberal or conservative position they usually hold will also have some bearing.

The importance of the restoration of their relationship with you is a major factor. A variety of factors will affect them as they formulate a compatible posture for dealing with this. Three kinds of decisions will be described:

### **Supportive**

Most parents continue to love their child in a way that allows them to say "I love you," to accept the reality of the child's sexual orientation and to be supportive. In fact, now that the relationship between parents and child is on a level of mutual honesty and trust, most parents say their relationship is better than it ever was. All parties begin to feel better about what has happened.

Although they may have had some glimpses prior to this time, supportive parents are increasingly aware of your needs. They become concerned about the problems that you have to face. Although we'd had some glimpses prior to this time, my wife and I became more aware of our son's needs and what he'd been through. In fact, we were amazed that he had handled all the tensions and problems as well as he did for all those years.

Our awareness and love for him soon involved us in offering to begin solving some problems in an effort to reduce some of those tensions: a single room at college would enable him to live his life without having to offer excuses or explanations to a roommate. Dan was invited home more often and gradually became an important member of our family. When Ted told his brother, we were able to talk to Louis and support Ted.

### **This Far And No Farther**

Sometimes parents respond by making it clear it's an issue that no longer requires discussion. Although they can discuss the matter, they are quite fragile in dealing with it. They have progressed this far and wish to go no further.

This does not necessarily reflect a negative attitude toward you. They know their limits and don't want to be pushed beyond them. Although you need to respect that stance, you can still make efforts to reach out to them.

Let them know that you love them -- in word and deed. Cautiously let them know some things that you do related to your sexuality; i.e., gay groups you're involved in (community center, religion, athletics). Make it a point not to let them drift away from you.

Introduce them to some of your friends; meeting other homosexual persons (in small numbers) will help to break down the stereotypes they may hold.

## **Constant Warfare**

In some instances your sexual orientation can be the staging area for constant warfare. Everything you do and say is viewed as a symptom of your "problem." The hours you keep, your language, choice of friends, vocational selection, school grades, etc. (However, in reality, it may reflect a parent's feeling of personal inadequacy.)

As long as this condition exists, both parent and child are in a no-win position. Generally speaking, if one parent assumes this extreme a position, the other parent may have difficulty choosing a role that is far from it. When relating to their children, parents are often outwardly supportive of each other -- even if behind closed doors they don't completely agree between themselves.

I'm convinced that most parents who attend a parents' meeting or who enter into personal conversation with a supportive parent greatly increase the chance that they'll not remain negative. If they won't attend a meeting, maybe they'll meet with some parents at a quiet restaurant. If all attempts fail, don't let the situation get you down. Find a parent substitute or friend to whom you can turn for support.

## **Relapses**

A word about relapses is important. Problem-solving and changing personal attitudes often can be diagrammed as two steps forward and one backward.

It's not at all uncommon for parents to slip back a step or two to rehash something you thought was behind you. Allow them time to rework it. It will be disappointing to you when this happens, but it's the way change usually comes about.

## **STAGE 6: TRUE ACCEPTANCE**

### **Not All Parents Get This Far**

Some parents get this far. Most may love their child without finally accepting the child's life. Many reach the point where they can also celebrate their child's uniqueness. These fortunate ones view homosexuality as a legitimate expression of human sexuality.

When asked if they wish that their child could be changed, they respond, "I'd prefer to change our homophobic society so my child could live his life without rejection and fear."

Parents at this stage face up to their own guilt, that they are a part of a guilty society, a homophobic society. They reflect on the gay jokes they've told and laughed at over the years. They begin to understand the problems they unknowingly created for their child. This coming to terms with themselves may lead them to view the oppression of all gays and lesbians in a new light.

They begin to speak out against the oppression; they talk to friends about the issues involved as a means of educating others. They support gay friends of their son or daughter; they attend parent meetings to help other parents. In short, they become

committed to a cause and find a way that is comfortable for them to make a positive contribution. Some do it boldly, others work at it quietly.

### **One Family's Story**

About two years prior to knowing about Ted, we began to sense that our son was drifting away from the family. We thought it was simply a stage he was going through; as soon as he completed this "stage," he'd come to his senses and his life and ours would come back together.

In an effort to help him we tried at different times to reach him. One month we'd try to be his friend, interested in what he was doing and allowing him considerable latitude. When that didn't work, we tried bringing him to his senses by being confrontive and demanding. To our mutual frustration, nothing worked.

My wife became increasingly aware that we were "losing" him. What we thought was a typical teen-parent communication gap seemed to be getting out of hand. We knew he was unhappy and were frustrated that we were unable to help. It never crossed our minds that his being gay and our lack of understanding related to the problem.

I've often thought about what has transpired since then; I've looked upon it as an unplanned journey. It was thrust upon us; we'd hardly have signed up for it if given the option of choosing something else.

Unplanned, however, does not mean unwelcomed. Today we can say "We're glad we know." We've been able to support our son on his journey. We hope that he can say, "Unplanned, but not unwelcome."

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