

The Coming Out Process

The term “coming out” (of the closet) refers to the life-long process of the development of a positive gay identity. It is a very long and difficult struggle for many gays because they often have to confront many homophobic attitudes and discriminatory practices along the way. Many gays first need to struggle with their own negative stereotypes and feeling of homophobia, which they learned when they were growing up. Before these gays can feel good about who they are, they will need to challenge their own attitudes and take them from the lower end of that homophobic continuum (repulsion, pity, tolerance) to feeling of appreciation admiration. But it often takes years of painful work to develop a positive gay identity. Then, many gays begin to make decisions about whom to tell that they are gay. Many gays are afraid to “come out” to their friends and family.

What might they be afraid of?

- Reject – loss of relationships
- Gossip
- Harassment/abuse
- Being thrown out of family
- Being thrown out of the house
- Having their lover arrested
- Loss of financial support
- Losing their job
- Physical violence

Why might gays want to come out to friends/relatives?

- End the “hiding game”
- Feel closer to those people
- Be able to be “whole” around them
- Stop wasting energy by hiding all the time
- Feel like they have integrity
- To make a statement that “gay is ok”

How might gays feel about their coming out to someone? Why?

- Scared
- Vulnerable
- Relieved
- Wondering how the person will react
- Proud

How might someone feel after someone comes out to them?

- Scared
- Shocked
- Disbelieving
- Uncomfortable
- Not sure what to say
- Not sure what to do next
- Wondering why the person “came out”
- Supportive
- Flattered

- Honored
- Angry
- Disgusted

What do you think gays want from the people they come out to?

- Acceptance
- Support
- Understanding
- Comfort
- Closer friendship
- That knowing won't negatively affect their friendship
- A hug and a smile
- An acknowledgement of their feelings

Adapted from Safe Space Resource Manual, University of Georgia. Original author unknown.

Before Coming Out: Questions for People who are LGBT to Reflect On

The coming out process is different for each person and in each situation. Before an individual decides to come out, it could be helpful to evaluate these suggestions in light of her or his own personal situation and needs. Heterosexual allies can assist friends who are LGBT by helping them consider these issues in their process of deciding whether or not to come out.

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 others' confusion and decrease their confidence in your judgment.

Are you comfortable with your sexual identity?

Be clear about your own feelings about being lesbian, gay, or bisexual or transgender. If you're wrestling with guilt or depression, get help in getting over that before coming out to non-gay people. Coming out can require a lot of energy and a reserve of positive self-image. If you are comfortable with your identity, those to whom you come out will often sense that, and have an easier time accepting your disclosure.

Do you have support?

In the event you get a negative reaction, there should be someone or a group that you can turn to for emotional support and strength. Maintaining your sense of self-worth is critical.

Are you well informed about LGBT issues?

The reactions of others will most likely be based on a lifetime of information from a homophobic society. If you've done some serious reading on the subject, you'll be prepared to answer their concerns and questions with reliable and accurate information. Know some books that you can share with others who might want to know more or have a contact name for a P-FLAG chapter.

Is this a good time?

Timing can be very important. Be aware of the mood, priorities, stresses, and problems of those with whom you would like to share your identity. Choose a time when they're not dealing with major life concerns. What people are dealing with in their own lives may affect their receptivity to your news.

Can you be patient?

Others will require time to deal with this new information. Remember that it took many of us a very long time to come to terms with our sexuality. When you come out to non-gay people, be prepared to give them time to adjust and to comprehend what they learned.

Don't expect immediate acceptance, but try instead to establish an on-going, caring dialogue.

What's your motive for coming out now?

Hopefully, it is because you care about the people you intend to come out to, and you are uncomfortable with the distance you feel between you and them. Never come out in anger or during an argument, using your sexuality as a weapon.

Have you tried to anticipate others' reactions?

Consider your general relationship with those to whom you intend to come out. What might their concerns be? How can you address those concerns? What message do you want to send? For example, try to affirm mutual caring and love before disclosing your news. Emphasize that you are still the same person. (An excellent book to help you consider these questions is *Coming Out: An Act of Love* by Rob Eichberg.)

Have you thought about how you will respond to negative reactions?

Be prepared that your revelation may surprise, anger, or upset others at first. Try not to react angrily or defensively. Try to let others be honest about their initial feelings, even if they are negative. Remember that the initial reaction may not be the long-term one. Keep the lines of communication open with people to whom you come out. Respond to their questions and remember that they are probably in the process of re-examining the myths and stereotypes that we all have been exposed to. If someone rejects you, do not lose sight of your own self-worth. Remember that your coming out was a gift of sharing an important part of yourself that that person has chosen to reject.

Is this your decision?

Remember that the decision to come out is yours and you can decide when, where, how, and to whom you wish to come out. Don't be guilt tripped or pressured into it before you're ready. Coming out decisions must be made carefully, and only you can weigh the potential benefits and the potential consequences. Coming out is an on-going process, not a single event. All people who are lesbian, gay, or bisexual have to make decisions about when and to whom to come out almost every day. Remember that you have the right to ask anyone to whom you come out not to share your disclosure with others. You may want to role-play and practice before you tell someone. Although coming out gets a little easier the more you do it, it's important that your words and thoughts be well chosen. Whenever you come out, reflect upon the experience and learn from it, because there will always be a next time.

Adapted from: Moore, J. Safe Zone Resource Manual, University of South Carolina.

Coming Out Model

Below is a model of the coming out process: Please Note: These pages are not representative of exactly what happens to each individual, but are general stages to use as guidelines. Sometimes people skip steps, go back and forth between steps, or never get through of all the steps.

Stage 1: Sensitization

This stage happens before puberty. This stage is characterized by the child noticing that they are different from their same sex peers.

Stage 2: identity Confusion

This stage commonly occurs in adolescence. The individual recognizes that they are experiencing same sex attractions. Thinking that they are probably gay, lesbian or bisexual causes a great deal of anxiety. social condemnation of same –sex feelings greatly contributes to this identity confusion.- the social stigma creates feeling of guilt, and the individual feels that they need to be secretive about discussing their romantic interests with their peers or family.

Stage 3: Identity Assumptions:

This stage occurs in late adolescence or early adulthood. It is characterized by self-definition as lesbian, gay or bisexual. Lesbian identity is typically realized through one or more intense emotional relationships. Gay men usually realize their gay identity through sexual contacts with other men. The individual begins regular association with other LGB people. There is a change from tolerance to acceptance in their identity as they become more involved with LGB community.

Stage 4: Commitment

It is at this stage where the individual adopts their same sex feelings into their daily life. They feel comfortable and natural about themselves. They are ready to form romantic relationships. Some LGB people tend not to talk to straight people about their identity, using careful discretion as to whom they come out to. Many choose to proudly express their identity, and to become very involved with LGB community.

Troiden, Richard R, Ph.D, "Homosexual Identity Development," Journal of Adolescent Health Care. 1988.