Coming Out: Telling loved ones about your sexuality

"Coming out" is the process of self-acceptance as a lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer (LGBTQ+) person. Coming out can be both a difficult and liberating process. This article series offers information on making the very personal decision to come out to family, friends, co-workers, and others.

This is the second in a four-part series of articles on coming out. Read the previous article, "Deciding to come out."

Telling loved ones about your sexuality

If you make the decision to come out, you may want to make a plan. This will help you navigate what can sometimes be a difficult, emotional discussion with friends and loved ones.

Here are some steps to take when coming out:

First "test the waters." If you aren't sure how someone will react, you could begin by broaching the subject of sexual orientation in general. You might ask a question like, "My cousin just told me he's gay. Do you know anyone who's gay?"

Tell the people you trust most first. That might be a close friend, relative, mentor, or teacher. Explain that they are among the first to know. Ask people to respect the confidentiality of your conversation. You might say, "I wanted you to know. But please don't discuss this with anyone. I want to be the one to decide whom to tell and when to tell."

Talk with others about their coming-out experiences. When you're ready to come out, ask the friends you spoke with first to be available afterward so that you can let them know how it went. If things went well, you can celebrate together. If things did not go as you had hoped, your friends can offer support.

Consider talking with a counsellor, therapist, or someone from an LGBTQ+ support group. Getting a disinterested perspective can help you address concerns you have before telling loved ones your sexual identity. You can also contact your employee assistance program (EAP) for support.

Coming out to family and friends

Telling parents, grandparents, siblings, children, aunts, uncles, and friends that you are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer can be difficult no matter how comfortable you are with your identity. Coming out takes planning and practice.

Decide whom you want to tell first. Consider telling a close relative first. LGBTQ+ people often worry, "What if my family rejects me?" Sometimes family members may be shocked or rejecting, and this is the time to find outside support. Sometimes, family members will come around, but it may take months or even years.

Choose a time to have the conversation when everyone is relaxed and has time to talk. You know the people in your life, and you're in the best position to decide when and where to tell them about your sexuality.

Find a way to begin the conversation. You might start by saying, “We’re close. But I’ve been keeping a part of myself from you because I’ve been worried about how you might react. I want to be open and honest, and because you know me so well, I’d like to share this with you.”

Give people time to react. People may need time to adjust. Some of your friends or relatives may say that they knew all along and be immediately accepting. Others may be surprised. Just as coming out is a process, “finding out” is also a process—it takes time to adjust.

Be prepared to answer questions. “How long have you known?” “Does this mean you’ll never have a family?” “Aren’t you worried about AIDS?” “Why have you kept this from me?” “Who else have you told?” “What makes you certain that you are gay?”

Leave the door open for future conversations. You might say, “I know this may have come as a surprise to you. You may have questions or think of things to say tomorrow or next week. We can continue to talk about this whenever you want.”

Remember that you don’t have to tell your whole family or group of friends at once. If you want your conversation to be kept confidential, be sure to communicate that to the people you’ve told.

Remember that your sexuality is just a part of who you are. Feel free to remind others that coming out does not mean other parts of your character, belief structure, and personality have suddenly changed. Coming out is simply a formal announcement that lets others know about a portion of you that makes you who you are.

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Adrienne Shoffner, MA, NCC
Senior customer success manager