Coming Out: Deciding to come out

"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 first in a four-part series of articles on coming out.

Deciding to come out

"People forge a LGBTQ+ identity first to themselves and then they may reveal it to others," says GLAAD, the LGBTQ+ advocacy group.

The decision of when and if to come out, and to what extent, is personal, and people who come out may or may not decide to share that identity publicly. An LGBTQ+ person may come out only to a few trusted friends or to everyone they know.

LGBTQ+ people are coming out at a younger age than ever before, as social conventions change and as more role models, public figures, and mentors make their orientations known publicly. The Human Rights Campaign's "Growing Up LGBT in America" report found that 9 in 10 LGBT youth say that they are out to their close friends, and 64 percent say they are out to their classmates.

However, coming out is a process of self-discovery not limited to just young people. A person can come out at any age or any stage of life. Because of this, there may be different groups of people that an LGBTQ+ person may want to consider telling about their sexuality including educators, employers, co-workers, and family members.

It may help to read and find out about people who have come out and to learn about LGBTQ+ issues and the gay community where you live. There are excellent books, articles, and online resources, including the Human Rights Campaign's "Resource Guide to Coming Out," which you can find at *http://www.hrc.org* and The PFLAG Canada website *(http://www.pflagcanada.ca)* also has numerous resources for LGBTQ+ people, including a series of guides entitled "What's it like to be.?"

The risks of coming out

Some of the fear experienced by LGBTQ+ people around coming out lies in the risks that can come with it. Some people choose never to come out. Some choose only to be out to certain family members and close friends.

A few reasons someone might keep their sexual identity a secret include:

Uncertainty. They may feel unsure about what would happen if they did come out to family members, co-workers, and people in the community.

Rejection. Not everyone will be accepting. Some people may lose friends or support from family after coming out.

Discrimination. While many workplaces, schools, and communities have policies and practices of nondiscrimination, anti-gay jokes and comments, gossip, harassment, and exclusion still exist in many places.

Physical harm or property damage. Some LGBTQ+ people may experience bullying or discrimination after they come out.

Privacy. Some people may feel that their sexual orientation is no one's business. They may wish to keep many aspects of their life private.

Religion/spirituality. Personal or familial religious beliefs may cause some people to experience doubt or insecurity surrounding their sexual identity. Many LGBTQ+ people question if they will be able to fully maintain their religious/spiritual practices and conviction while staying true to their sexual identity.

Cultural concerns. In some cultures and communities, being LGBTQ+ may be considered shameful and could open a person up to isolation or even danger.

You should never feel pressured or rushed into coming out. Do so only when and if you're ready. However, also consider the emotional energy that staying closeted can take. The urge to fit in can be strong. And for some LGBTQ+ people, lying or not telling others may seem easier than coming out, but this can also cause tremendous stress.

As PFLAG, the support, education, and advocacy organization for Parents, Families, and Friends of Lesbians and Gays, says, "Hiding your sexual orientation keeps the important people in your life from knowing about a big part of you. Hiding who you are keeps your relationships from being real."

There is no "right" or "wrong" way to come out. There is only the way that is best for you, individually, and for the people you love. If you do decide to come out, remember that it is a process. It's not something you do once and then you're done. Who you choose to tell, when you choose to tell them, and how you decide to go about it is up to you.

This is the first in a four-part series of articles on coming out. Read the next in the series, "Telling Loved Ones About Your Sexuality."

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