

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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Coming Out: Telling loved ones about your sexuality

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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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Coming Out: Coming out to your community

"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.

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Coming out to your community

In the process of coming out, you will also want to decide if there are others in your life and community whom you want to tell that you are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or queer. Do you want to tell your neighbors? Your child's teacher? Your health care provider?

Here are some suggestions on coming out to people in your community:

Doctors and health professionals. Many health professionals are accepting of LGBTQ+ people and are also attuned to the unique health challenges that they may face. In some rare cases, a health professional may be homophobic or unaccepting. If this is the case, change health care providers. [Out for Health](#) has more information about choosing a health care provider, knowing your rights, and more.

Also know that most health care forms may ask about sexual activity, risks for pregnancy, and use of contraceptives. These questions are necessary for proper health care and can also help prompt you to inform or remind your physicians of your sexuality.

Your child's teacher. Schedule a private time to meet to have this conversation. In the meeting, tell your child's teacher that you have decided to come out and that you wanted to share this information with the teacher. Tell the teacher that you know that you both have the child's best interests in mind. Explain that you expect the teacher to take prompt action to stop any teasing or harassment of your child by other children who may decide that your family's makeup is something to be made fun of. Allow the teacher time to ask questions.

Your legal or financial adviser. You may want to come out to your legal or financial adviser in order to secure the best legal protections for you and your partner. For more information, see the article "Legal and Financial Issues for Gay and Lesbian People."

Your faith leader. Religion and homosexuality can have a complicated relationship. Some religions and denominations have historically been more accepting than others. Therefore, the decision to come out to your faith leader and/or religious community is a deeply personal one. One resource that may help is The Trevor Project's guide "[LGBTQ+ Religion](#)."

Pay attention to your feelings. Come out to people in your community as it makes sense to you to do so.

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Coming Out: Coming out at work

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Coming out at work

Like coming out to friends, family, and community members, coming out to co-workers or your manager is a personal decision. But harassment against LGBTQ employees is widespread, and you might worry that if you come out at work you will face subtle or obvious forms of discrimination from co-workers or management. But at companies that are supportive of LGBTQ people, that’s much less likely to happen.

As with every decision to come out, you should consider how comfortable you’ll feel discussing your sexual identity with whomever you’re planning on talking with—in this case, your manager and/or colleagues. Although there are some risks, being open about aspects of your non-work life can lead to closer relationships with co-workers.

If you decide to come out at work, here are some suggestions:

Find your company’s written policy of nondiscrimination based on sexual orientation. This may help you have any conversations with your human resources (HR) department if you feel you receive any harassment or discrimination as the result of coming out.

Decide whom you want to tell. You might consider telling your manager about your sexual orientation first. Disclosing your identity to your manager sends a signal of trust, and usually has a positive impact on your professional relationship. If you’re unsure about how to proceed, someone in your company’s HR department may be able to provide some assistance. You can also contact your organization’s assistance program for support.

Talk with LGBTQ people at your company who have come out. Find out if there is an LGBTQ employee network group at your company. You may discover that there is quite a community and that people are welcome to include same-gender partners at company functions. Or, on the other hand, you may find people who would advise you to downplay your orientation at work because of real or perceived discrimination. Your ultimate responsibility is to take care of yourself and your career in these situations and to stay within your own level of comfort.

If you decide to come out at work in stages, tell the people who know your sexual orientation that some co-workers don’t yet know. Explain that you want to be the one to tell people.

Come out in your own words and your own way. If you don’t feel comfortable making a direct statement like, “I’m a lesbian,” then drop subtle or strong hints. When talking with a co-worker, for example, you might refer to your partner.

Be prepared to handle people’s reactions. Give them time to adjust to the news, and tell them you are available to answer any questions. Recognize that while some people may be tremendously supportive, others may be shocked, saddened, ashamed, or disapproving.

Developing a community of friends and co-workers who are supportive will help make this rejection less difficult.

Once you have come out, you may want to take further steps to find support and network to develop professional relationships:

Find mentors and role models. Once you come out at work, search for like-minded co-workers who can serve as mentors and role models, both within your company and outside of work.

Network with LGBTQ people within your company. Many companies have resources for LGBTQ people. Contact information may be listed on your company's intranet.

Join an LGBTQ professional organization. Not only do these organizations create networking opportunities, they can help build and strengthen safe and equitable workplaces for LGBTQ people and their allies.

Coming out can be both a difficult and liberating process. It will likely require courage on your part. Coming out can increase your energy and self-esteem, and it can increase the trust and confidence others have in you. The more support you have from friends and family during this time, the easier the process will be. And the more open you are with the important people in your life, the deeper and richer your friendships and relationships can be.

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Creating an LGBTQ+-Inclusive Workplace

For lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer people, and those of other sexual identities (LGBTQ+), “coming out” is the term used to refer to the process of revealing sexual orientation or gender identity for the first time. Far from being a one-time rite of passage or overnight change, coming out is something LGBTQ+ people must do over and over again: to friends and family as well as every time they encounter a new person, group, or situation they wish to be open about their sexual orientation or gender identity with.

The process of coming out is different for everyone. Some people come out to everyone in their lives immediately, some take their time, and others choose to protect their sexual orientation and/or gender identity and not come out to certain people or groups. One thing that coming out has in common for most LGBTQ+ people is that it's not easy and may elicit anxiety and fear of being ostracized and excluded.

The workplace can be a particularly sensitive and challenging environment for employees to come out. As a manager, you will want to do your best to make your workplace a safe and comfortable environment for everyone. Here are some tips to encourage inclusivity and diversity when it comes to sexual orientation and gender identity.

Make your workplace's discrimination policy available. Your workplace should have an anti-discrimination policy in place to cover sexual orientation and gender identity. Make sure this policy is up to date and readily available to your employees.

Don't make any assumptions. It's easy to assume, if you're straight, that others are too, and our language often conveys these assumptions. Replace questions like “do you have a husband?” with neutral language like “do you have a partner?” By doing this, you will model appropriate behavior for your direct reports so it becomes the norm.

Allow people to identify as gender neutral. Allow your employees a third gender option on any official forms, or allow them to answer “prefer not to say.”

Celebrate LGBTQ+ pride. Many cities around the world dedicate specific days, weeks, or months to celebrating gay pride within their communities. Bringing the celebration into the workplace can help you demonstrate to your team and organization that you value acceptance, respect, inclusiveness and diversity. Displaying symbols of pride like a positive space sticker or flag in your workspace shows everyone that you are committed to a LGBTQ+ positive workplace and may make employees more comfortable in coming out. Check online for what Pride events are happening in your community and for other resources like videos, stories, or an online event to share with your team.

Bring education into the workplace. Educating yourself and your workforce is of vital importance in keeping current on the best practices to foster diversity and inclusivity. Invite a trainer who specializes in LGBTQ+ inclusivity or a local LGBTQ+ organization to lead a workshop for you and your staff.

Though visibility of LGBTQ+ people has increased and there have been gains in formal rights, discrimination still exists. It is possible that your workplace will include people who are prejudiced against these identities. Make it your mission to have a zero tolerance policy towards any harassment, homophobic, or transphobic language in the workplace. Encourage anyone who has a problem or feels uncomfortable coming out to speak with you or a human resources (HR)

representative. If any of your employees need additional support, you can also encourage them to speak to a counselor with your assistance program.

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Supporting the LGBTQIA+ Community: Tips for being an ally

Even if you don't identify as someone within the LGBTQIA+* community, you can always be supportive to friends, coworkers, loved ones, and the community at large through becoming an ally. Here's how to start.

Educate yourself about issues of sexual orientation and gender identity. Become familiar with basic terms like "coming out," "homophobia," "sexual orientation," and "gender identity or expression."

Learn about use of pronouns. People have the right to choose what pronoun they're addressed by (she/her, he/his, or they/their). If you're unsure what to use, ask what pronouns the person would like to be addressed by. If you make a mistake, apologize, and correct yourself. List your own pronouns in your email signature or on your name tag at events where you're meeting new people to signal that you understand and respect addressing people by their preferred pronouns.

Ask questions. Be honest and admit if you don't know what a word means or what language to use. Don't let being nervous about using the "right" language keep you from interacting. If you aren't sure what words to use or what to say when talking with your LGBTQIA+ friend or relative, ask for help or search online for the definition and use of the word.

Lead by example. Don't be afraid to speak up when other people act in a discriminatory way toward LGBTQIA+ people, tell offensive jokes, or engage in anti-gay behaviour. Don't use epithets, even if you hear other people use them.

Be respectful of people's privacy. Understand that some people may choose not to disclose personal information. Even if you suspect that someone might be gay, bisexual, or transgender, it's their decision to share this. No one should ever be "outed" by another person as this is a personal choice and there could be unknown dangers that they could be exposed to.

Join efforts in your community to raise awareness about LGBTQIA+ issues and to work for equality and non-discrimination. Participate in gay rights fundraisers or other "Pride" events, or volunteer at a support group or organization. Search online for organizations such as [PFLAG Canada](#), which helps those struggling to understand their gender identity, offers support for the LGBTQIA+ community, and is a helpful organization for their family and friends.

Treat others as you would like to be treated. Remember that actions speak louder than words.

** The use of the acronym LGBTQIA+ — Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer and/or Questioning, Intersex, Asexual and/or Ally, and + to acknowledge non-cisgender/non-straight identities not included in the acronym — is an umbrella term accepted by advocacy organizations and is intended to include all those seeking gender equity.*

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Transgender Etiquette

You don't have to be a member of the transgender community to learn what being transgender means. You may have a friend, family member, or co-worker who is transgender or transitioning, or would simply like to have a better understanding of how to be respectful to someone who is transgender.

Transgender: What is it?

Whether you already consider yourself an ally or you are beginning to educate yourself about the transgender community, it's important to understand some basic definitions.

Transgender: A term used to describe people whose gender identity differs from the sex they were assigned at birth. The term transgender should be used as an adjective, not as a noun. Do not say, "Chris is a transgender," or "There are a lot of transgenders here." Instead say, "Chris is a transgender person," or "There are a lot of transgender people here." Do not use slang to refer to a transgender person as much of this is considered derogatory or offensive.

Transsexual: A term "preferred by some people who have permanently changed—or seek to change—their bodies through medical interventions" (GLAAD Media Reference Guide). Do not assume that just because a person is transgender that they are transsexual or wish to have genital surgery. There are many options to the journey and life of a transgender person.

Gender identity: A person's internal, personal sense of being a man or a woman (or boy or girl). For transgender people, the sex they were assigned at birth and their own internal gender identity do not match. It is also important to know that for some people, their gender identity does not fit neatly into man or woman or boy or girl.

Non-binary: A term that someone may use if they "experience their gender identity and/or gender expression as falling outside the categories of man and woman" (GLAAD Media Reference Guide). It's important to know a person who is transgender may or may not identify as non-binary, and you should only refer to someone as non-binary if they identify this way.

People in the transgender community may describe themselves using one (or more) of a wide variety of terms, including (but not limited to) transgender, transsexual, non-binary, agender, and third gender. When in doubt, always use the term that the person you are speaking to or referring to uses to describe themselves.

Is being transgender a choice?

The simple answer to that question is no. People do not decide to become a different gender any more than they decide how they want to look.

Be respectful of boundaries and always approach transgender individuals with respect and care. You should never ask someone transgender when they "chose" to become a boy or girl. Think of it this way: When did you choose your gender?

How can I be respectful?

Educating yourself

If you are concerned that you don't know how to be polite to a transgender person, it is important that you take ownership over your lack of understanding. Do your own research. Find an online suggested reading list and check out as many books as you can.

While it is okay to ask for clarification if there is something you don't understand, don't expect the transgender and nonbinary people in your life to be your sole text. If you do ask questions, be respectful of the person you are speaking to and their boundaries in the same way you would wish to be approached when asked about a very personal issue in your life.

Most transgender people will be happy to answer most questions as long as you are polite and the questions aren't inappropriate. Just keep in mind what is and isn't appropriate. For example, it is certainly appropriate to ask them what name they are using but asking about how they have sex is certainly never appropriate, just as it wouldn't be appropriate with anyone else.

Names and pronouns

Always refer to a transgender person by the name they prefer to be. If you happen to refer to the transgender person by their former name, simply correct the name in the rest of the conversation. However, know that it can be dangerous in some areas to call a transgender person by their former name. Transgender hate crimes are still an unfortunate part of society, so it is important to be aware of who may be listening to your conversation.

The same principles stand when it comes to pronouns. If the person you are addressing or referring to presents themselves as a woman, then address that person as a woman. If the person is presenting as a man, then consider that person a man. If you mistakenly use the wrong pronoun, don't apologize too much. Just follow the mistake with the right term and continue what you were saying.

Sexual Preference

Gender is not the same as sexuality. For example, a male who transitions to female (MTF) and likes other females is lesbian, a female who transitions to male (FTM) and likes other men is gay, and a MTF or FTM person may consider themselves straight if they are attracted to the opposite sex.

Assuming that all transgender people are sexually attracted to the opposite gender is no different than assuming that the only people who are attracted to women sexually are men.

Surgery

A transgender individual may choose to undergo any number of surgical options or medical interventions. However, not having any particular surgery does not make anyone less transgender and does not make them any less of their gender.

Do not ask about surgeries or plans for surgeries unless you are in the medical field and the person you are speaking to is your patient. In those cases, keep your questions pertinent to the person's medical needs. Asking personal questions because you're curious can cause a fear of judgement and make your patient nervous to seek future medical care.

Privacy

Many transgender people are not "out" or are out only to a small group of people, so please do not out them. When a transgender person tells you of their transgender status, they are entrusting you with their story. If you out them then you are betraying their trust.

Resources

If you are interested in learning more about the transgender community, you may find these resources helpful.

[The Canadian Centre for Gender & Sexual Diversity](#)

[The Canadian Professional Association for Transgender Health \(CPATH\)](#)

[GLAAD](#)

[The Trevor Project](#)

[Trans Lifeline](#)

[Trans Student Educational Resources](#)

If you're looking for local resources, the [Canadian Aids Society](#) has a list of resources divided by province and territory.

This article was developed in collaboration with Tristan Byrnes, LMHC, Supervisor Immediate Support Counsellor for LifeWorks.

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