Gay and lesbian issues: "coming out"

As a gay or lesbian person, you may have been keeping part of your life secret from many people for a considerable period. This can be very stressful and can create barriers between you and some of the people you love, but have chosen to keep in the dark. As a result, many gay and lesbians eventually reach a point when they want to reveal this important part of themselves to other people. In other words, they decide to “come out.”



If you have arrived at this stage yourself, you are probably feeling considerable trepidation at how to go about it. Who will you tell? How will you tell them? How will they react? Remember that you are not alone. There is a lot of support waiting for you, and all you have to do is reach out for it.

Tips and Tools You Can Use

Keep in mind that “coming out” is a very personal decision and should be yours and yours alone. Don't “come out” because your friends want you to, or even because your partner wants you to. In some instances, or for some people, it isn't the right choice. “Come out” only because you want to and are comfortable and ready to share this part of your life with others.

Although the emotional rewards of “coming out” can be considerable, you will inevitably also face challenges—don't go into the process with your eyes closed! Think about the possible issues in advance, and you will be in good shape to strategize a smooth and successful transition into this new stage of your life.

Here are some positive and negative issues to consider:

Pros

- Living a secret life can be a tremendous drain on your energy and can create ongoing stress. “Coming out” brings many gay and lesbian people a sense of relief, and removes personal barriers from relationships with heterosexual family members and friends.
- “Coming out” will allow you to take advantage of the support that many heterosexual family members and friends are likely to provide. Although there may be some initial shock, many of these people undoubtedly care about you very much and will want to be there for you.
- When you “come out,” you may find it easier to play an active part in the gay and lesbian community, and will be able to take advantage of all the support and opportunities that wait within it.

Cons

- Just like other minority groups, the gay and lesbian community is sometimes subject to discrimination and even blatant hatred from ignorant individuals or groups. When you lose your “invisibility,” you are likely to face more challenges in these areas.
- Some of the people you had thought of as friends or loving family members may turn their backs on you. Such actions are unjustified and wrong, but you need to face the possibility that some close relationships may be irrevocably broken when you come out of hiding.
- The moral or cultural climate in some families, workplaces or communities is such that they will never be able to fully accept your sexual orientation. In this situation you need to carefully assess whether or not you can personally handle being ostracized and cut off from worlds in which you have previously lived. Fortunately, these situations are becoming increasingly rare.

Are You Ready to "Come Out"?

Although many of the challenges are similar, some different issues do arise at different ages or stages in life.

"Coming out" as a teen

- How sure are you about your sexual orientation? Many people are never entirely sure but may still feel comfortable about “coming out.” If you are still uncertain, you may want to wait a while until it becomes clearer where your focus lies.
- Have you made yourself knowledgeable about homosexuality? Will you be able to answer your parents' questions and provide them with materials to review?
- What is your parents' moral position on homosexuality? If they belong to a religious or cultural community that takes a stand against gays and lesbians, do you believe your parents will be flexible enough to give you support? If not, can you comfortably survive without their support?
- Have you put support mechanisms in place to help you through any challenges that may arise? For example, school or college counsellors or resources within the gay community.
- Are your motives pure and honourable? Never “come out” to spite your parents or as an expression of your anger against them. “Come out” because you believe it’s the right thing for you to do.

"Coming out" as an adult

- How sure are you about your sexual orientation? Are you comfortable with your gay or lesbian identity?
- Have you considered the degree to which you will “come out”? You don't have to come out to the entire world at first—some gay and lesbian people prefer to begin with a small circle of close family and friends.
- Are you currently performing at peak level in the workplace? Are you well thought of and able to count on support from some superiors?
- Have you put a support network in place to help you through tough periods?
- Have you considered a mentor or colleague in the workplace who you could “test the waters” with?
- Confiding in someone you can count on can be invaluable before you take the big plunge.
- Have you developed a “coming out” strategy that includes assessment of appropriate timing?

Tips on "Coming Out" to Parents

Don't just announce the news on the spur of the moment; your news will be much better received if you plan a strategy first.

- **Take into account the best timing and place.** Consider the family situation at the moment: Are there other stresses in place such as illness, relationship problems or financial issues? If so, it may be smart to wait a while until your parents have regained the energy to focus on your news.
- **Put support mechanisms in place.** Review your “coming out” strategy with a counsellor or a trusted member of the gay community. Continue to call on their support when challenges arise.
- **Have information and material available** for your parents to review.
- **Expect your parents to be shocked at first.** Typically most parents will go through some or all of the following stages: shock, denial, grief, guilt, questioning, quiet internal review, and finally acceptance.
- **Prepare to be patient.** Your parents will need time to absorb the news and adjust to you in a new role. Don't expect it to happen overnight. Remember that although you have had time to adjust to your identity, it will be news to them.

When considering the decision to “come out,” remember that this sensitive topic can be easier for others to understand and accept if you plan a strategy before discussing your view with them.