

Coming Out

Coming out of the closet is the process by which a lesbian or gay man recognises and accepts their homosexuality. For some this process is simple and straightforward; for others it is difficult and trying. For all it is a learning experience,

For too long lesbians and gay men have been told that they must hide their homosexuality. They have been asked to live a lie. They have been forced to lead double lives. They have been asked by their homophobic society to deny who they really are and whom they really love. Lesbians and gay men have lived with enormous fear -- fear for their rights; fear for their jobs; fear for the loss of those they care about; at times -- fear for their lives. Some suggest that the "closet" places each gay individual in a situation of "sane schizophrenia" in which their lives are never permitted to be whole or integrated,

Coming out is a step towards greater integration. It is a testing of fears and paranoias about personal rejection. It leads towards fuller and more honest and satisfying relationships. Coming out will not solve all problems, indeed it often creates new ones. But coming out offers many a greater sense of reality about the loves, fears, and relationships in their lives.

Indeed, those who have come out -- in whatever ways and to whatever degrees -- have generally experienced a greater sense of relief and increased self-esteem through sharing the "secret" of their sexual orientation. This fact has been documented by a growing number of personal accounts written by lesbians and gay men and also by studies carried out by psychologists and researchers at the Kensey Institute.

An Educational Rationale for Coming Out

Coming out is undoubtedly the most effective educational tool available to gay people as they try to change people's attitudes about homosexuality and lesbianism. In recent years excellent books, improved media coverage, visible lesbian and gay individuals -- including celebrities -- and more supportive attitudes from most mental health professionals and many religious leaders have led to greater acceptance of gay people within American society. But homophobic myths, fears, and stereotypes continue to receive widespread expression in our homes and workplaces, on our streets, in our municipal councils and state legislatures, in the courts, and at the polls. The powerful threat of homophobia has not yet gone away.

The educational task that lies ahead is a massive one.

Several recent polls have indicated that non-gay people who know that they are acquainted with gay people are far more likely to support gay rights than those who do not realise that there are gay people whom they care about in their lives. Gay people are aware that they are truly everywhere, but the relative invisibility of lesbians and gays continues to allow countless Americans to overlook gay people; to tell cruel gay jokes; to assume that no one is gay; and to believe that they do not know or love any lesbians or gay men.

Each time even one gay person comes out to such non-gay persons, their worldview is challenged, their fears about homosexuality are confronted, and their level of

understanding is raised. The awareness that a person one loves or respects is gay often has a profound impact on a non-gay individual's willingness to re-examine his or her ideas, attitudes, and feelings about the lives and rights of gay people.

Absolutely no one has the right or adequate knowledge to tell another person when, how, or to whom to come out. For some people coming out is probably not a realistic goal at this time -- at least not on a large scale. Ill-timed or unplanned revelations about one's sexual orientation can result in unemployment, disinheritance, or personal rejection. Thousands of lesbians and gay men, however, can testify that in most instances the experience of coming out to selected non-gay relatives, friends, and co-workers has been a positive one.

No matter what one's life situation may be, for nearly everyone there are at least a few individuals to whom one might come out with positive effects. Such decisions require careful consideration and do involve risks. Usually there are very real benefits in terms of improved communications, deepened mutual understanding, more honest personal relationships, relief from painful fears of eventual rejection, and a very real contribution to educational dialogue with non-gay persons about our lives and our rights. These messages are aimed at helping you make realistic and responsible decisions about coming out to parents, relatives, friends and other non- gay persons in your life.

The Process

"Coming out of the closet" is an on-going issue in the life of virtually every gay person. Coming out has to do with how we perceive ourselves, with how we deal with our sexuality, with how we structure our lives, and with how we present ourselves and our loved ones to our families, to our friends, or to the world. There are many stages in the process of coming out. Most of us move through that process time and again. Coming out is not simply telling one's parents, joining a gay organization, having a lesbian or gay love affair, or moving to the "gay ghetto" in a large city. Coming out is a life-long process by which we constantly deal with the acceptance and integration of our gayness within a partially repressive and hostile society.

Quite understandably, some individuals are very private people who consider sexual orientation to be an extremely personal matter. But not unlike the heterosexual persons who have no qualms about wearing wedding bands, embracing in public, or discussing a vacation with a loved one during coffee break at the office, many of us have come to see that we have both the need and the right to openly and publicly celebrate and share the loving relationships which are part of our lives.

For some lesbians and gay men the process of coming out is a relatively easy one -- there never is any great difficulty in recognising or accepting homosexual feelings. For many others of us the process in its initial stages is often far more painful. We may struggle with very great difficulty for a very long time before we are able to affirm ourselves as gay people, to say nothing of sharing that fact with those whom we love. Unfortunately, there are still some people who live in situations where reality simply demands that their sexual orientation be kept a well-guarded secret.

We live in a society in which we have been consistently indoctrinated with the worst myths, fears, and stereotypes about homosexuality. We were consistently told as young people that it is not OK to be gay. Indeed our society is structured in a way which often assumes that everyone both is and ought to be heterosexual. Within such a context it is not surprising that many people -- be they young or old -- have experienced the gravest difficulty in accepting their homosexual feelings or orientation. The guilt has been unwarranted. The pain cannot be justified. The occasional suicides represent a tragic fact. The homophobia, which so affects the feelings and behaviour of non-gays towards us, still has a very damaging effect upon the ways in which we may perceive ourselves.

Self-acceptance

The first step in the coming out process is that of moving towards a recognition and acceptance of one's gayness. Some people become aware of their lesbianism or gayness early in life. Others do not reach that awareness for a long time because of the many social pressures that demand heterosexual conformity. Still others find that they are unable to relate to our society's stereotypes of what gay people are like. Many of us have assumed for a long while that we could not possibly be gay because we did not conform to some popular stereotype. It is no wonder that gay people go through periods of being uncertain about who they really are and about how to integrate their affectional feelings into their lives.

The process of recognising and accepting one's gayness can be a very lonely experience. But increasingly we have been able to accept our feelings and our gay or lesbian identities more readily. We can see our sexuality as a positive and joyful part of our lives. We can see the injustice of the discrimination, fear, and oppression that are a part of our day-to-day experience. We can see the immorality in failing to tell young people the truth and the facts about homosexuality. If, like many people who are heterosexual, we have problems in our lives, we can seek professional help to deal with those problems rather than being told that we need to change our sexual orientation.

Coming to have positive feelings about one's homosexuality is an essential part of the coming out process. Until one feels good about being gay, it makes little sense to share the fact of one's sexual orientation with others -- unless they are clearly friends or helping professionals who are prepared to help you towards greater self-acceptance. The person who says to a parent, friend, or employer: "I have something horrible I need to tell you about myself" is not "coming out". She or he is seeking pity or revealing self-hatred.

Coming out to other gay people

Most people would agree that the support of other gay people is an important part of the coming out process. For some, their first sexual experience represents a profoundly important moment in the coming out process. Other individuals have perhaps acted upon their gay feelings long before they were able to clearly identify them as such.

There continues to be some gay people who are very reluctant to share the truth about their sexuality with other gay men and lesbians. In a very few instances their fears and senses of jeopardy may be justified. But one must question when some fearful gay

individuals go so far as to participate in the worst "fag or dyke" jokes in the office, to speak out against gay people and gay rights at meetings, or to avoid having any gay friends. In the coming out process, we need to overcome our fears of one another.

Clearly, each individual has the right to decide how and to what extent -- if any -- he or she will relate to the gay and lesbian movement, become involved in the gay subculture, or identify publicly or privately with other lesbian and gay men. One does not have to conform to any particular stereotypes, fads, or sub-cultural expectations. One does not have to expect that she or he will feel deep bonds of friendship with every gay person one meets. In the coming out process, one does not need to abandon non-gay friends, one's existing lifestyle, or anything else. Coming out implies making decisions about one's lifestyle and recognising that each and every individual has both the right and the need to make such decisions for herself or himself.

But the fact remains that gay and lesbian friends, organisations, church groups, and places have been a very important source of support for most of us as we dealt with the on-going process of coming out. Some gay people in small communities or in rural areas have experienced a particularly painful kind of isolation. Our friendship, regular communications by telephone and letter, and lesbian and gay publications of all kinds bear a particular significance for them as they come out in ways which are appropriate to their special personal situations.

Most gay people are very respectful of the reasons why some people must continue to keep their sexual orientation a very private matter. Most -- if not all of us -- would find it unthinkable to come out on behalf of someone else.

Coming out to non-gay people

Once we have recognised and accepted our gayness, and have shared it with some other gay people, it becomes more realistic and more fruitful to share the fact of our affectional orientation with non-gay people in our lives such as parents, relatives, friends, and co-workers.

It would undoubtedly be helpful to share and discuss coming out experiences with other gay people. We can often learn from one another's experiences. Many gay and lesbian organisations devote programs to "coming out issues" from time to time.

A great many people advocate coming out to people in person. Others have had very successful experiences coming out through letters. Sometimes a letter can be easier on you and may allow the non-gay persons to have their own "shock reactions" in private before you get there. Whether you come out in person or by letter it is important to see it as an on-going process. Your relatives or friends will almost certainly have questions and feelings that will require a response. Prior to actually coming out, many people have found it helpful to drop some hints or to test the waters. Without explicitly stating you are gay, you can indicate with whom you are spending time or that you are not planning on marriage. You can discuss homosexuality in a general way in order to sound out the attitudes of non- gay

people. You can let them know that you have lesbian or gay friends who are important to you. Such steps often make the actual revelation of your own gayness less expected.

How to do it

When you begin to come out to non-gay people, your experiences will probably vary. Sometimes it will go well. Occasionally a relationship will be terminated abruptly or will fade away unexpectedly.

From the experiences of many lesbians and gay men, their parents, and friends, we offer a number of suggestions about coming out to non-gay people. You need to evaluate these suggestions in the light of your own personal situations and needs.

Be clear about your own feelings about being gay. If you are still dealing with a lot of guilt or depression, try to get some help in getting over that before coming out to parents or other non-gay people. If you are comfortable with your gayness, those to whom you come out will often sense that fact and be aided in their own renewed acceptance of you.

Timing can be very important in coming out. Be aware of the health, mood, priorities, and problems of those with whom you would like to share your sexuality. The mid-life crises of parents, the relationship problems of friends, the business concerns of employers, and countless other factors over which you have no control can affect another's receptivity to your revelation.

Never come out during an argument. Never use coming out as a weapon. Never encourage a parent to feel guilty for having caused your sexual orientation -- he or she didn't!

When coming out to parents or family try to affirm mutual caring and love before launching into your announcement about your gayness.

Be prepared that your revelation may surprise, anger, or upset other people at first. Try not to react angrily or defensively. Try to let other people be honest about their initial feelings even if they are negative. Remember that the initial reaction may not be the long term one. Ultimately the individual who has really faced and dealt with his or her homophobia may be far more supportive than the person who gives a superficial-liberal expression of support.

Emphasise that you are still the same person. You were gay yesterday and will be tomorrow. If you were loving and responsible yesterday, likewise you will be loving and responsible tomorrow.

Keep lines of communication open with people after you come out to them -- even if their response is negative. Respond to their questions and remember that they are probably in the process of re-examining the myths and stereotypes about gay people that we have received from our culture.

Be sure that you are well informed about homosexuality. Read some good books about the subject and share them with individuals to whom you have come out. Goering's Book

Center, Iris Books, Mediaplay, Barnes & Noble, and Books-a-Million has a number of very good books in stock.

Encourage your parents or others to whom you come out to meet some of your lesbian and gay friends.

Remember that it took many of us gay men and lesbians a very long time to come to terms with our own sexuality and even longer to decide to share the fact with others. When you come out to non-gay people, be prepared to give them time to adjust and to comprehend the new information about you. Don't expect or demand immediate acceptance. Look for on-going, caring dialogue.

If someone to whom you have come out 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, which that person has chosen to reject. If rejection does come, consider whether the relationship was really worthwhile. Is any relationship so important that it must be carried on in an atmosphere of dishonesty and hiding? Was the person really your friend or simply the friend of someone he or she imagined you to be? Remember also that the loss of a friend is not the end of the world. Coming out decisions must be made cautiously, but integrity and self-respect are extremely important in the long run.

Remember that the decision to come out is yours. Don't be guilt tripped into it by people who think that everyone must come out or by snooping people who ask inappropriate questions. You can usually decide when, where, how, and to whom you wish to come out. At this stage in our society, full public declarations about one's sexuality are not necessarily the best decision for most people.

Try not to let your family and close friends find out about your gayness from third parties such as neighbours or the media. Try to tell them personally beforehand.

If you come out to family members, find out if there is a local Parents of Gays organisation. The national organisation of Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays is located at Box 27605, Washington, DC 20038-0243, telephone (202) 638-4200. Or introduce your parents to the family members of some of your gay friends who have already come out with positive effects.

Whenever you come out, reflect upon the experience and learn from it.

Never let yourself be pressured into coming out before you are ready. Not by these messages. Not by anyone.

Coming out is one of the most difficult things we do in our lives. It won't always go well, but it can be a very freeing experience most of the time.

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