

Coming Out

A basic understanding of the issue

The term "coming out" (of the closet) refers to the life-long process of the development of a positive sexual or gender identity. It is a very long and difficult struggle for many LGBT individuals because they often have to confront homophobic attitudes and discriminatory practices along the way. Many first need to struggle with their own negative stereotypes and feelings of homophobia that they learned when they were growing up. Before these individuals can feel good about who they are, they will need to challenge their own attitudes and take them from the lower end of that homophobic continuum (revulsion, pity, tolerance) to feelings of appreciation and admiration. But it often takes years of painful work to develop a positive gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgendered identity. Then, many individuals begin to make decisions about whom to tell about their identity. Many are afraid to "come out" to their friends and family.

What might they be afraid of?

- ▼ Loss of friends, acquaintances, co-workers and other relationships
- ▼ Gossip
- ▼ Harassment/abuse
- ▼ Being thrown out of family
- ▼ Being thrown out of home
- ▼ Being rejected by religion
- ▼ Having one's lover arrested
- ▼ Loss of financial support
- ▼ Loss of employment
- ▼ Being demoted or unfairly evaluated at work
- ▼ Physical violence

Why might they want to come out to friends/relatives?

- ▼ End the "hiding game."
- ▼ Feel closer to those people
- ▼ Be able to be "whole" around them
- ▼ Stop wasting energy by hiding all the time
- ▼ Demonstrate personal integrity
- ▼ Make a statement that "gay is OK"

How might they feel about their coming out to someone? Why?

- ▼ Vulnerable and frightened
- ▼ Angry/frustrated
- ▼ Relieved
- ▼ Unsure how the person will react
- ▼ Proud

How might someone feel after someone comes out to him/her?

- ▼ Shocked
- ▼ Disbelieving
- ▼ Uncomfortable
- ▼ Afraid that same-sex person is “coming on” to them
- ▼ Not Scared
- ▼ Relieved
- ▼ Not sure what to say
- ▼ Not sure what to do next
- ▼ Wondering why the person "came out"
- ▼ Supportive
- ▼ Flattered
- ▼ Honored
- ▼ Angry
- ▼ Disgusted

What do you think LGBT individuals want from the people to whom they come out?

- ▼ Acceptance
- ▼ Support
- ▼ Understanding
- ▼ Willingness to learn more about LGBT lives
- ▼ Comfort
- ▼ Closer friendship or family relationship
- ▼ That knowing won't negatively affect their friendship or family relationship
- ▼ A hug
- ▼ An acknowledgment of their feelings
- ▼ Reassurance that sexual orientation is just one part of the person who comes out, not the entirety of the personality

Developed by Vernon Wall and Jamie Washington, 1989