

## Issues Around Coming Out

The term "coming out" (of the closet) refers to the process of developing a positive lesbian, gay, or bisexual identity. It is a long and difficult struggle for many LGB individuals because they often have to confront the homophobia and biphobia they learned growing up. Before they can feel good about who they are, they have to challenge their own attitudes and move from the negative end of the Riddle Homophobia Scale (repulsion, pity, and tolerance) to feelings of appreciation and admiration. It often takes years of painful work to develop a positive lesbian, gay, or bisexual identity. Then LGB individuals need to decide when and to whom they will disclose their sexual identity. At times, they are afraid to come out to their friends, family, and coworkers.

What might they be afraid of?

- losing friendships and family connections
- losing closeness in relationships
- being the subject of gossip
- being harassed
- being physically assaulted
- losing financial support from family members
- being thrown out of the house
- losing their job
- losing their children

Why might lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals want to come out to others?

- to end the secrecy
- to feel closer to those people
- to be able to be "whole" around those people
- to stop wasting energy by hiding an essential part of themselves
- to feel like they have integrity
- to make a statement that "gay is OK"

How might lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals feel about coming out to someone?

- scared
- vulnerable
- relieved
- concerned about how the person will react
- proud

How might an individual feel after someone has come out to them?

- disbelieving
- uncomfortable
- not sure what to say
- not sure what to do next
- wondering why the person came out
- scared
- shocked

- angry
- disgusted
- supportive
- flattered
- honored

What do lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals want from the people they come out to?

- acceptance
- support
- understanding
- comfort
- a closer relationship
- hearing that disclosure will not negatively affect the relationship
- an acknowledgement of their feelings
- a hug and a smile

What are some situations in which someone might come out to you?

- They may have chosen to come out to you because you are a close friend or family member and they want to have an honest and genuine relationship with you.
- They may feel that you are a person who will be understanding and accepting, and so trust you with this very personal information.
- They may not be sure how you will react, but they prefer to be honest and are tired of putting time and energy into hiding their identity.
- They may decide to come out to you before they really know you, in order to establish an honest relationship from the beginning.
- They may come out to you because some aspect of your professional relationship makes it difficult to continue to hide their sexual orientation.
- They may come out to you because you are in a position to assist them with a concern, determine their access to certain resources, or address policies which affect their life.

Ways that you can help when someone comes out to you:

- Remember that the person has not changed. They are still the same person you knew; you just have more information about them now than you did before. If you are shocked, don't let the shock lead you to view the person as suddenly different.
- Don't ask questions that would have been considered inappropriate before their disclosure.
- If you would like more information, ask in an honest and considerate way. If you show a genuine and respectful interest in their life, they will most likely appreciate it. Some good questions to ask are:
  - How long have you known that you are lesbian/gay/bisexual?
  - Are you seeing anyone?
  - Has it been hard for you having to hide your sexual identity?
  - Is there some way that I can help you?
  - Have I ever offended you unknowingly?

- Don't assume that you know what it means for the person to be lesbian, gay, or bisexual. Every person's experience is different.
- They may not want you to do anything necessarily. They may just need someone to listen.
- Consider it an honor that they have trusted you with this very personal information. Thank them for trusting you.
- Clarify with them what level of confidentiality they expect from you. They may not want you tell anyone else, or they may be out to others and not be concerned with who finds out.
- If you don't understand something or have questions, remember that people who are lesbian, gay, or bisexual are often willing to help you understand their life experiences.

Adapted from the Northern Illinois University Safe Zone Program, and from Vernon Wall and Jamie Washington, 1989