



## **Coming Out ~ A Resource for People Questioning Their Sexuality**

“Coming out” is the universally adopted term for people publicly or formally acknowledging their sexuality to their close family, friends and colleagues as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual or Transgendered (LGBT). A person’s sexual orientation is essentially defined by their physical, sexual, affectional and emotional attraction to other people. People of all cultures, religions, and socio-economic backgrounds throughout history have identified themselves as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual or Transgendered.

Whilst identifying with a different sexuality is as natural as breathing, the majority of people find it difficult through a myriad of reasons to ‘come out’. Coming out entails acknowledgement of their attraction to for example, the same sex (homosexual – lesbian or gay), opposite sex (heterosexual), attraction to both sexes (bisexual), identification with the opposite gender such as a male or female feeling trapped in the wrong body (transgendered/ transsexual).

The difficulties in coming out are often tied up in social, cultural and religious factors and negative messages that we receive or observe as we are growing up and becoming aware of our sexualities, sexual identity and sexual preferences. Because alternative sexualities are often frowned upon, ridiculed or openly condemned (homo-, trans- phobia) by people we trust and look up to, we also internalise this prejudice. Internalising includes taking on other people’s beliefs – i.e. ‘hating gays’ – if people we love and care about ‘hate gays’, then at some level we begin to hate ourselves because our opinions of ourselves is often based on how others see and feel about us – especially close family and friends. People have often experienced a number of different reactions from their families, friends and colleagues as a result of deciding to come out. Some of the experiences and questions will be discussed here.

Whilst coming out might feel like an impossible task, after the initial difficulty, it can also be the most rewarding and freeing experience of your life. After all, you haven’t changed from the person you were before you told your family and friends that you have different sexual preferences; they just know one more thing about you, something that makes you unique. We have included some caveats to show a range of reactions to coming out:

Some reactions are positive – When S came out to her best friend she was very apprehensive – ‘I didn’t really know what to do – I mean, I have known I liked girls since I was at secondary school but you couldn’t

really tell anyone because they would just make your life really miserable. There was another girl in the year above me who had it tough. So when I decided to tell my best friend, I was really really worried – I didn't know how she was going to react. My greatest worry was that she wouldn't want to know me anymore. So one day, we were at her house and we'd had just had a really nice meal – and I told her I was a lesbian. Her reaction was 'oh I have always known you were different – I'm glad for you if you're happy'. That was it simple as that, I was over the moon, and we cried together for a long while, I was so relieved. Now there were just my parents to tell...

Others have found that people they have told are quite curious and inquisitive – when G told his mum, he was quite shocked at her reaction of absolute ease. I was so scared of what my mum would say when I told her. I had wanted to forever and then one day I thought it's now or never! So I turned to her and said "mum I really love you. I want to tell you that I'm gay." There, I'd done it! She looked really weird for a second and then smiled and said 'so, what's it like being with a man?' I nearly fainted! But we're even closer now.

Positive actions have included throwing a 'coming out' party for the LGBT family member, to inviting their partners to a family gathering and general positively supportive behaviour and reactions. J says 'I was scared to tell my family, especially my mum – I didn't want to hurt her. But surprisingly, she took it really well and I found out later, that she'd had a go at dad when he tried to make fun of me. That weekend, mum suggested I bring my girl friend round for dinner. I couldn't believe it, neither could my girlfriend when I told her!'

However, not all reactions are positive. Negative reactions have differed from mild irritation – 'oh I'd better make sure I stand with my back to the wall' to parents demanding that the individual moves out of the family home immediately. M says 'I went to my local pub with my new boyfriend and started chatting to some of friends there. I introduced him and one of them became really aggressive – I can't understand what his problem was! I mean, to make that kind of comment – how *boring* and disappointing, I never thought I'd see him turn like that.'

When K told her parents after much hesitation, she wasn't quite prepared for the ferocity of the reaction from her mother; 'I had been thinking of telling them for over 2 years and just could not bear the thought of destroying all the hopes and dreams they had for me. But I knew deep inside that I had to do this for me – I wanted to be free to live and love the woman of my choice and unless I told them, I knew I wouldn't be able to. I had hidden my feelings all my life, I just didn't want to do that anymore. So I told mum one day – she became very quiet' K says 'I could see she was gutted really. But then out of nowhere, she shouted 'that's disgusting! You ARE sick, you make ME sick. You're a disgrace, you have humiliated the whole family and brought shame on us!' I didn't speak to her for over a year after that. However, we're trying to talk, so maybe things just might work out. I don't regret telling her though.'

C had a mixed reaction when he finally managed to tell his wife that he was a transsexual. They had been married for 24 years at the time, and had 3 grown children and 2 grandchildren. 'We'd been to see a play that

night you see, and the main character was a transsexual. It was very difficult to contain how I felt, I didn't want it to be a secret anymore, a lie. So when we got home, I said to my wife "you know the show we just saw, what did you think of the main character?" She asked me why, and I told her that I had been cross-dressing for a number of years now, and had decided to live in role full time. I also told her I was having pre-hormone therapy. We didn't really say much more after – she cried a lot over the next few weeks. We have talked a lot since then. That was four years ago. I'll be having final surgery in a few months. I couldn't be happier.

Being LGBT is a normal and natural part of who you are. Many people question their sexuality for varying periods of time to make sure that what they are feeling is justified. Again, this is a very natural process, one of thinking it through – making sure it is what YOU want. Therefore, it is important to acknowledge and be aware of your feelings as much as possible. Equally, it is important to be aware of what you want out of your life.

Getting to the point of acceptance can be difficult, you may have many questions, for example:

- *How do I tell my parents/ partner/ spouse/ children?*

You may have had feelings that go against your upbringing and the expectations of others for the term of your natural life to date. It is not easy then, after you might have invested your life in trying to please others (i.e. getting married, having children, etc..) to finally realise that *you* are not happy – that you may be 'living a lie'. Most of us live through agonising life choices and decisions to 'keep the peace' or 'anything for a quiet life'. These options take an incredible amount of strength and resources to stick with. Sometimes it can seem unbearable to be honest to yourself at the possible cost of pain and agony to your family / extended family. However, it is essential to be aware that you too, have a right to be happy generally and in love. As for telling someone important, ultimately, be as honest and open as you are able to be. Their reaction is their responsibility – you cannot control it. You may have to help and support your loved ones, and allow them to understand what is going on for you and you may face supportive or harsh reactions, only you can decide how much you will tolerate of the latter.

- *What will they think of me? Is there something wrong with me?*

Does it *really* matter what 'they' think of you? Going against one's family, friends or colleagues' expectations is very hard, after all – their opinions of us make us who we are! Having said that, you have a right to live your life the way you want to. There isn't anything at all wrong with you. After all, ten percent of the world's population is LGBT – and they can't ALL be wrong?

- *They will blame me for bringing shame onto the family and letting them down*

Sadly society is based on opinions and strong beliefs about theological family units. However, it does not mean that they are right. 'Traditional' families are of course part of the greater society, and to some extent, have to follow rules and principles even if they disagree with them so as to be 'accepted'. Alternative families are increasingly more visible with leading figures in television, sport and films taking the courage to come out and live their truth. Again, you have to decide what is more important for

you – being honest to yourself and being happy, or being miserable in the trying to keep them happy?  
You are not responsible for people’s beliefs or reactions.

- *My family is all I have, what if they disown me? What if they reject me?*

Your family, friends or colleagues may be surprised, shocked or irreverent to your sexuality. Ultimately, whilst it may be difficult for them to accept your sexuality or sexual identity, their feelings about it and their ‘social programming’ i.e. homosexuality is wrong, etc., may prevent them from acknowledging your right to your way of life. Again, you have to accept that this is their responsibility. Whilst you may be very apprehensive about the reactions of family and friends, again, it is important to keep in mind the fact that you have a right to be happy too. If this means coming out (to yourself, or others) then this should be respected. As you have read above, not everyone reacts positively, and not everyone reacts negatively. Ultimately, you may have an idea of how your family will react, and as such, you can think about and discuss with someone when and how to tell them – if you choose to. It may be important to seek therapy to help you deal with these reactions and feelings.

- *I feel like killing myself*

A number of people struggling with their sexuality often feel that they cannot cope with the difficulties it brings with it. However, it is important to know that what you’re feeling is a normal reaction to a stressful and difficult situation, and that it *will* pass. It might be useful to talk with friends, whom you trust, or you can speak to someone at a helpline – there are numbers listed below. It might be useful to find an LGBT-Affirmative therapist, someone who is specially trained in dealing with LGBT issues and may them self identify as LGBT.

- *My parents have arranged my marriage, how do I tell them?*

Your family is simply following age-old cultural traditions, which is an important part of their rituals and rites of passage for you. However, if you are questioning your sexuality, or indeed know that you are LGBT, then it is important to tell your family as soon as you can. If this feels difficult, then speaking with a brother or sister and getting their support can be helpful. Whilst your family may feel angry, disappointed, let down, etc, it will give them a chance to pull out of the marriage agreement with grace also allowing them to save face and money. It is important to be very honest, as going through with the marriage to keep the family happy will ultimately cause pain to you, your partner and both families, not to mention extended relatives and possibly children.

***Your sexual orientation does NOT define who you are, it’s just an important part of you. You didn’t choose to be gay, you just are – ask yourself, would you knowingly choose to be part of a group that is different? Do heterosexual individuals choose to be heterosexual?***

***Whatever the case, there is always someone you CAN talk to please get in touch for counselling support that will offer you time and space to explore your needs.***

**Resources:**

- London Lesbian and Gay Switchboard – 0207 867 7324 <http://www.llgs.org.uk/> – 24 hour telephone helpline.
- Ireland – Cara Friend – Belfast - <http://www.cara-friend.org.uk/>
- Lesbian and Gay Employment Rights (LAGER) 020 7704 2205
- Broken Rainbow <http://www.brokenrainbow.org.uk/> 0300 999 5428
- The Naz Project – 0208 741 1879
- The Intercome Trust - <http://www.intercomtrust.org.uk/portal.htm>
- The Samaritans – 24/7 – 08457 90 90 90
- Saneline - 08457 678 000
- MIND – national number – 08457 660 163

**Websites and reading material:**

- [www.pflag.org](http://www.pflag.org) – Very comprehensive US site for friends and families of LGBT communities
- [www.fflag.org.uk](http://www.fflag.org.uk) - Very comprehensive UK site for friends and families of LGBT communities
- [www.stonewall.org.uk](http://www.stonewall.org.uk) – equalities issues and resources for the LGBT community
- [www.bullyonline.org/related/gay.htm](http://www.bullyonline.org/related/gay.htm) – support and advice if you or someone you know has been bullied because of their sexuality
- **A Stranger in the Family** £9.95 By Terry Sanderson, Published by The Other Way Press, ISBN 0948-98208x
- **Now That You Know: A Parent's Guide To Understanding their Gay and Lesbian Children** £9.99 By Betty Fairchild & Nancy Hayward, Published by Harvest Brace & Co., ISBN 0-15-600605-7
- **Different Daughters** £9.99, L..Rakin, editor, Published by USA, Cleis, ISBN 157344 1279
- **Beyond Acceptance: Parents of Lesbians & Gays Talk about their experiences** £9.99, By C.W. Griffin M.J. & A.E.Wirth, Published by St. Martin's Press, ISBN 0-312-16781-4