

Coming Out

Many people have realised that living their lives in “the closet” robs stress the closet creates for them. However, “coming out” does not mean telling everybody they meet that they are gay, lesbian or bisexual. What it does mean are no longer worrying about being found out by friends, family or colleagues.

When people have discussed how they came out, many of them use the imagery of a great burden being lifted from them, that they feel like the free souls they were meant to be. But this may not happen initially, coming out can be a stressful and difficult process, especially when family and friends react negatively, but in time gay people have said that they are happier out of the closet.

Coming out is a process that allows the gay person to get in touch with their real self, the person they were meant to be before being forced to pretend to be heterosexual. In many countries around the world coming out is also a political act. Being gay can mean being part of a large, diverse community of people who are under attack from others who don't understand homosexuality and thus are afraid of it. Gay, lesbians and bisexuals who have come out have decided that it is time to stand up and be counted, to be identified as part of a community and to make homosexuality and gay people familiar so that they no longer induce fear.

The development of sexual orientation

People with predominately same sex orientation show similar stages of identity development, but with individual variations. The model that follows is useful as a way to understand what is happening. Not every individual follows each stage and it is common for some to work on the developmental tasks of several different stages simultaneously.

Pre-coming Out

Assuming that object-choice identity is formed by the age of three, it is possible that at a conscious or pre conscious level the child and family members know even then that the child's sexual orientation “differs.” A major conflict is created for the individual, the family and ultimately for society when a child appears to be about to break with the expectations of getting married. Often the young person feels alienated and “different.” Fear of rejection and ridicule put a barrier in the open acknowledgement of homosexual feelings. As a consequence, the person resolves the conflict through the use of certain defence mechanisms such as denial, repression or sublimation (sublimation is the channelling of conflictual feelings into socially acceptable behaviour).

The attempts to deny or repress true feelings may lead to behavioural problems, psychosomatic illness, depression, low self-esteem and suicide attempts. Others may sublimate their feelings and become intensely absorbed in some socially valued activity, such as school work, religion, music and art where being alone are not regarded as strange.

Facing the existential crisis of being different is a healthy resolution and this is the process of coming out. It can begin at any age depending on a number of factors such as family, personality, friends etc.

Coming Out

The first step in coming out is outing yourself to yourself. The vast majority of people who have recurring homosexual thoughts or experiences are homosexual, although they often will not want to face the fact. The first step of identifying oneself as gay or lesbian can take many years to complete. But many people who think they accept their new-found homosexuality have never really identified themselves as gay or lesbian. Self-identifying is a way of starting the coming out process. They cannot tell other people that they are gay or lesbian until they have told themselves. At the same time, sharing this fact with someone else can function as the beginning of self acceptance.

Looking at themselves in a mirror, seeing who they are, accepting the person looking back at them and saying "I am gay" or "I am a lesbian." Saying it slowly, over and over again. Another exercise in outing oneself to oneself is to find a quiet place to go for a walk, bringing a piece of paper and a pen, and begin by writing at the top of the sheet of paper I am gay and then in another column writing all the negative words and phrases used against homosexuals. Reading and facing the words used against gay and lesbian people helps to desensitise the gay person.

It is important that individuals choose carefully those people to whom they disclose. Confiding in the most caring and accepting people is very important. Trustworthiness is important, because those people will have to keep the news private. It is important to keep control over the coming out process. Once they gain acceptance from a number of people, it is much easier to withstand rejection.

There is always the possibility that people will react negatively, and it is important to master ways to handle such situations and to cope with any related stress. It is a completely normal reaction for friends to be surprised and need time to digest the news.

There are many reasons why parents may not be the first family members told. Parents may not necessarily be directly involved in their lives anymore. Also, they may be closer to their siblings and want to come out to them first. Most

parents have expectations of their children, straight or gay, that children can rarely meet. It is often hard on parents, when their children don't meet their expectations; parents simply feel as if part of them has not lived up to their standards. Therefore, unlike when straight friends found out about their sexuality, parents will feel as if they are being told that a part of them is homosexual. It is unlikely but possible that parents might actually accept their child being gay right away. It is more likely that parents will not react positively at first.

Whether or not parents and other family members have accepted the homosexual member, their lives have now altered profoundly. Not only has the gay person come out of the closet but also has told all of the most important, closest heterosexual people in their life.

Searching for other gay people to find as friends and companions no longer centres around going to gay bars. The gay community today has newspapers, bulletin boards and community centres. Gay bars are now places for people to meet and have a drink, just like straight bars. The newest and fastest growing way that homosexual people are meeting is online, via the internet.

When the gay person does finally meet other gay people, coming out to them will not be a major task. Just by reaching out to them, there is an admittance of being gay or a coming out. Developing a family of friends is not something that is accomplished over one weekend. It takes time to develop friendships and bonds with people.

Exploration / Experimentation

This is the period of exploring and experimenting with a new sexual identity. There are several developmental tasks involved; first is to develop interpersonal skills in order to socialise with others with similar sexual interests. Having been socialised as heterosexuals, homosexual individuals may lack these skills. Secondly, for some there is the need to develop a sense of personal attractiveness and sexual competence. Thirdly, the recognition that self-esteem is not based upon sexual conquest may be an important task for some.

Initial Relationships

Learning how to function in a homosexual relationship is the task of this stage. The yearning for a more stable, committed relationship can be sabotaged by lingering negative attitudes about homosexuality. The fact that homosexual people have very few role models regarding intimate relationships and that there is a lack of public support for these relationships, makes the task even more difficult than in the case of heterosexuals.

Integration

An ongoing process of development, whereby new feelings about self continue to emerge. Reintegration and self definition takes place. Public and private identities are incorporated in a coherent self image. Relationships in this stage can be more successful than first relationships.

Further reading:

Byrne, S. & Larkin, J. (1994). *Coming Out: A book for lesbians and gay men of all ages*. Dublin: Martello Books.

D'Angell, A.R. & Patterson, C.J. (Eds.) (1995). *Lesbian, gay and bisexual identities over the lifespan: Psychological perspectives*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Sanderson, T. (1996). *A stranger in the family*. London: The Other Way Press.

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