

UNDERSTANDING THE COMING OUT PROCESS

What is "Coming Out?"

- ✦ Coming out is the process of recognizing, accepting, and sharing with others one's sexual and/or gender identity.
- ✦ The term "coming out" is a shortened version of the phrase "coming out of the closet," which is a metaphor for revealing one's sexual orientation and/or gender identity.
- ✦ The concepts of "being closeted" or "coming out" have sometimes come to be used in a more general way to describe the phenomenon of keeping hidden any trait, identity, behavior, or group affiliation that is potentially embarrassing.

The Heterosexual Assumption

In our society, people generally assume that everyone is heterosexual, and that everyone's gender matches their biological sex, so persons who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, and/or transgender must continually decide in what situations and with whom they want to correct such assumptions by disclosing their sexual orientation or gender identity.

In every new situation, with every new person they meet, they must decide whether or not to come out. For some LGBT individuals, it may be difficult to "pass" or not come out.

Coming Out Process Overview

- ✦ Coming out is not a single event, but a life-long process, which may begin at any age. There are many stages in the coming out process, and the process is not exactly the same for every person.
- ✦ Coming out can be a very long and difficult struggle because it involves not only confronting the constant assumption that one is heterosexual and/or that one's gender identity is based on one's sex, but also facing fears of or actual rejections by others, homophobic attitudes, restrictive gender norms, and discriminatory practices along the way.

These phrases describe different degrees to which an individual might be in or out of the closet:

Closeted = *"I don't want you to know"*

Passing = *"I assume you don't know"*

Covering = *"I don't know what you know"*

Implicitly Out = *"I'm gay. See it if you can."*

Explicitly Out = *"I'm telling you I am gay."*

Publicly Out = *"See me as gay."*

Val Dumontier, 1993

- ✦ Ultimately, coming out can be a very freeing experience for persons who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, and/or transgender, because it allows them to live a more honest life and develop more genuine relationships with others.
- ✦ Coming out does not solve all of an individual's problems; indeed, it may create new ones. Weighing the advantages and disadvantages of coming out is part of the process.

- ✦ There are different levels of being out, ranging from completely closeted to being publicly out. An individual may be out to some people and not to others, or out in some situations,

but closeted in others. For example, a person might be out to friends, but not to their family. A person might be out at school, but not in their home town. Someone might be out in their church, but not in their professional life. The choice to be out or not is often situational.

Stages in the Coming Out Process

Moving toward a recognition and acceptance of one's own sexual orientation and/or gender identity.

- ✦ Generally, the coming out process begins with coming out to oneself: the internal process a lesbian, gay, bisexual, and/or transgender person goes through in recognizing and accepting their sexual orientation and/or gender identity.
- ✦ This part of the coming out process involves becoming consciously aware of one's feelings for and attractions to people of the same sex, or to people of both sexes if one is bisexual.
- ✦ For transgender individuals, this phase involves becoming aware that one's internal sense of self as male or female does not match one's body or other's perceptions of them as male or female.
- ✦ Accepting those feelings and attractions may involve "un-learning" myths, misinformation, and stereotypes that one has been taught by society about people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual and/or transgender.
- ✦ For some, acceptance may also involve grieving for the loss of one's heterosexual or previous gender identity (i.e. feeling that one will never get married or have children, realizing they may not have the perfect church wedding their parents dreamed of for them, feeling they will let their parents down, etc.).
- ✦ Another aspect of this stage may be working through one's fears about how others may react to their sexual orientation and/or gender identity and fears about the possibility of rejection by family or friends. Developing a positive self-image is a crucial part of the coming out process.

Coming out to and gaining support from other lesbian, gay, bisexual and/or transgender people.

- ✦ As individuals "un-learn" the myths and stereotypes that previously formed the basis for their knowledge about homosexuality, bisexuality, or gender variance, they may need to replace that information with more accurate and positive information. They may do this, in part, by seeking out other lesbian, gay, bisexual and/or transgender people who can share their experiences with them.
- ✦ As an individual lets go of their heterosexual identity or their birth gender, they may experience a sense of isolation, of no longer fitting into the world around them. They may seek out people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual and/or transgender in order to develop a new sense of community or belonging. People who are lesbian, gay, bisexual and/or transgender may be perceived as the safest people to initially come out to since they are

not likely to react negatively or with prejudice. They may begin to develop a support network which helps them feel more comfortable with and established in their sexual orientation and/or gender identity.

- ★ This may include joining lesbian, gay, bisexual and/or transgender organizations, visiting a gay or lesbian bar, participating in a counseling support group for people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual and/or transgender, or coming out to non-lesbian, gay, bisexual, and/or transgender people who are likely to be supportive.

Coming out to non-lesbian, gay, bisexual, and/or transgender people.

- ★ As individuals feel more comfortable with their sexual orientation and/or gender identity, they may begin to come out to friends, family members, or co-workers outside the LGBT community.
- ★ Prior to actually coming out, they may begin to drop hints to “test the waters” for possible reactions. Without explicitly stating their sexual orientation and/or gender identity, they may indicate with whom they are spending time, or they may discuss issues related to homosexuality or gender variance in general in order to gauge others’ attitudes. Such preliminary steps can make the actual revelation of their sexual orientation and/or gender identity less unexpected.
- ★ As they experience positive reactions, they may feel more and more able to come out to others. If they experience negative reactions, they may go back into the closet for a period of time, they may use their support network to retain their self-confidence, or they may break off relationships with people who are not accepting of their identity.

The Down Low

"The Down Low" or "DL" or "on the DL" is an urban phrase used to describe discreet sexual behavior, particularly that of men who may engage in regular, secret, sex with other men while continuing sexual and romantic relationships with women.

In DL culture, men may rationalize that same-sex sexual behavior is solely a matter of physical pleasure and not a reflection of one's sexual orientation; thus they continue to identify as heterosexual, not identifying as gay or bisexual even though they are having sex with other men.

This behavior has been associated with communities in which traditional families and concepts of masculinity are greatly valued, so that being openly gay or bisexual could lead to considerable stigma.

Some gay men use the term down-low to refer to their choice not to broadcast their sexual orientation, and in that sense being on the down low can be analogous to being closeted.