

WHEN SOMEONE COMES OUT TO YOU: HELPING SOMEONE COME OUT OF THE CLOSET

The prospect of coming out, of revealing one's sexual orientation and/or gender identity, can be a daunting one in any given situation. There is always a risk that the person one chooses to tell may react negatively. The following information may help people who are not lesbian, gay, bisexual, and/or transgender understand some of the concerns that people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, and/or transgender have.

Many people in our society have been taught to fear, despise, or hate people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, and/or transgender. All of us have been exposed to a vast amount of negative, derogatory, and inaccurate information about people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, and/or transgender. When someone comes out to you, they share the information about their sexual orientation and/or gender identity with a keen awareness of the risks involved: the risk of losing their relationship with you, the risk of being rejected, the risk of being misunderstood, and many other risks. Unless you have given some indication of your feelings or beliefs about sexual orientation and/or gender identity, they may have no way of knowing in advance whether your reaction will be positive or negative.

Contexts in which someone might decide to 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 you are a person who will be understanding and accepting, and so trust you with this 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 and/or gender identity.
- ★ 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 impact their life.

How people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, and/or transgender might feel about coming out to someone:

- Scared
- Vulnerable
- Unsure -- wondering how the person will react
- Relieved
- Proud

What people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, and/or transgender might be afraid of when they come out:

- Rejection -- loss of relationships with friends or family
- Gossip
- Harassment or abuse
- Being thrown out of the family
- Being thrown out of the house
- Discrimination
- Being seen as sick, immoral, or perverted
- Loss of financial support
- Not being accepted in their religious community
- Losing their job
- Having their professional credibility questioned or undermined
- Physical violence

What people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, and/or transgender might want from the people to whom they come out:

- Acceptance
- Support
- Understanding
- Comfort
- Reassurance that their relationship won't be negatively affected
- Closer relationship
- Acknowledgement of their feelings
- Love

When someone comes out to you, the news may come as a total surprise, you may have already considered the possibility that this person might be lesbian, gay, bisexual, and/or transgender, or it may not be important to you one way or the other.

Some possible reactions to someone who has come out to you

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| ▪ Scared | ▪ Supportive | ▪ Disgusted |
| ▪ Shocked | ▪ Flattered | ▪ Not sure what to say |
| ▪ Disbelieving | ▪ Honored | ▪ Not sure what to do next |

- Uncomfortable
- Angry
- Wondering why the person came out

The way in which a person who is lesbian, gay, bisexual, and/or transgender chooses to come out to others often reflects how she or he feels about their sexual orientation and/or gender identity. The more positive responses the person receives to their news, the more comfortable they will feel with their identity, and the easier it will become for them to come out to others in the future. How you react to their disclosure of their sexual orientation and/or gender identity can help them out of the closet -- or keep them in.

What persons who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, and/or transgender have been told about their identity . . . and what you should not say

- You're just going through a phase.
- You're just depressed.
- You're just confused.
- Maybe you can find a therapist who can help you get over this.
- It's just because you've never had a relationship with someone of the opposite sex.
- You can't be gay -- you've had relationships with people of the opposite sex.
- It's just because you haven't had the proper male/female role models.
- You can't be a lesbian -- you're too pretty!

Ways you can help when someone comes out to you:

- ★ Remember that the person has not changed. They are still the same person you knew before, you just have more information about them 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 rude within the relationship before their disclosure.
- ★ If you would like more information, ask in an honest and respectful 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 you are lesbian/gay/bisexual/transgender?
 - Has it been hard for you carrying this secret?
 - Is there some way I can help you?
 - Have I ever offended you unknowingly?
 - Are you seeing anyone special?
- ★ Don't assume in advance that you know what it means for her or him to be lesbian, gay, bisexual, and/or transgender. Every person's experience is different.

- ★ They may not want you to necessarily do anything. 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 at all. 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 persons who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, and/or transgender often are willing to help you understand their life experiences.
- ★ If you find yourself reacting negatively, remember that your feelings may change. Try to leave the door open for future communication.

Portions adapted from "Coming Out," developed by Vernon Wall and Jamie Washington, 1989