



Education Department Resource

Coming Out: A Guide for Youth and Their Allies

Coming Out is now more than ever a youth issue. Studies indicate that many lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) young people are aware of their sexual orientation/gender identity by the time they are 13. Chances are that more than a few students at your middle or high school are wrestling right now with how and when to tell their friends and families they are LGB or T. Whether you are LGBT yourself or wondering how to react to a friend who has just come out to you, the following information can help you to manage your coming out experience openly and with sensitivity.

For LGBT Students...

Should I come out?

There are many good reasons to come out. It can be a tremendous relief to be open about your identity and to stop investing lots of energy in keeping secrets and worrying about what might happen if others “find out.” Being honest can help to bridge that distance you may have been keeping from friends and family, and can result in closer and more meaningful relationships with loved ones. And when you’re not constantly worried about meeting others’ expectations, you can put all of your energy into being authentic—in how you dress, talk, spend your time, and date.

There are also reasons to wait to come out to others. If you are under 18 and/or financially dependent on others, you may not want to come out if there is a chance you will be kicked out of your home or left to fend for yourself. If you fear harassment, abuse, or loss of emotional support, this too may be reason to put off coming out until you are in a more secure position.

If you are unsure about whether or not to come out, take your time and think things through rather than acting impulsively. Read books or magazines by and for LGBT youth. Watch a video about LGBT issues, join an online community, or call an LGBT hotline. If there is a youth group or trusted adult to whom you can safely and confidentially turn, take advantage of this option. You may also want to keep a daily journal of your reflections, questions, thoughts and fears until you are clear as to the right path for you.

Who should I tell?

Coming out is a life-long process. There will always be new people and new situations in which you will have to decide whether or not to come out. Unfortunately there is no Magic Eight Ball to tell you “outlook good” or “very doubtful”—you will have to rely on your instincts instead. In general, you should come out first to people you really trust and who you expect will be supportive and respect confidentiality.

For many people, coming out to parents or other close family members can be an intense experience (in a positive or negative way). For this reason, you may want to consider “practicing” on others who you trust before talking to your family, or getting the advice of LGBT people who can share what it was like to come out to family members. Coming out to family can be a source of great support or great angst—your decision about which family member to come out to when is a very personal decision that you should consider thoughtfully.

If you are thinking about coming out to a teacher, guidance counselor, nurse or other “official,” you may want to check into your school’s confidentiality policy first—in some cases these professionals may be obligated to share your information with others. If you are considering coming out to friends, choose carefully—your best friends may not all be the best at keeping secrets. Whether it’s because they just can’t help spreading gossip or need support themselves in dealing with your news, not everyone is as guarded as we’d like them to be.

I’m ready! When and how should I come out?

There is no definitive roadmap for how and when to come out, but there is lots of advice from those who have come out before you. Because coming out can be quite an emotional experience, some recommend writing a carefully worded letter that captures just what you want to say and gives the recipient time to absorb the news before meeting with you in person. Most people, however, do their coming out face-to-face. If this is your preferred approach, it is best to do a little planning ahead. It is usually easiest to come out privately to one person at a time (rather than to a group, say, at Thanksgiving dinner) and to avoid bringing a friend or lover to help you deliver the news. Choose a time and day when neither of you are tired or stressed, and when there is ample time to process and discuss things. Though it may help you to plan and rehearse exactly what you want to say in advance, try to avoid giving a speech and to make it more of a two-way conversation. Most importantly, don’t ever come out because others are pressuring you to do so, when you aren’t sober, out of anger, or as a weapon to hurt someone else. Coming out can be a wonderful experience, but only when you are comfortable with your own identity and ready to share yourself with others.

What kind of reaction should I expect?

Since coming out is first and foremost something that you are doing for yourself, don’t let worries about potential reactions veer you from your course (unless you fear for your safety or security). If possible, choose people to tell who you expect will give you the support and encouragement you desire. For most of us, there will be a time when we need to come out to someone who may be less than compassionate. Many people will say things out of shock or discomfort that they may not mean or realize is hurtful. It is important to remember how long it took you to come to terms with your own identity, and to be patient with others who may need time to come around. Some of those people may be distant or detached at first, so prepare yourself to deal with possible silence. Others may challenge you with difficult statements or questions, so you may want to think about how to respond to issues such as religion, your sexual activity and HIV/health status, and your willingness to get reparative therapy. Whatever comes up, take solace in the fact that most people will grow to be accepting over time and that it is not your responsibility to change the few who will never open their minds. For those who are willing to learn more, suggest books, websites, or local groups (such as PFLAG). This will not only help them to educate themselves, but will take the pressure off of you to have all of the answers. And while you’re at it, find some resources and support for yourself—coming out can be emotionally taxing and you don’t have to go it alone.

10 Tips for those on the receiving end...

1. It takes a lot of courage for someone to come out to you—listen to all they have to say without interrupting, judging, tuning out or buying into stereotypes about LGBT people
2. Tell them how pleased you are that they trusted you enough to share something so personal and congratulate them on the bravery it took to be so honest.
3. Let them know that you feel the same way about them as you always have and that nothing has changed (except that you can be even closer than before).
4. Ask questions and show that you are interested in learning about their feelings and experiences. Be respectful and stay away from personal issues (sex, HIV, etc.) unless they let you know it's okay.
5. If you are feeling uncomfortable or upset, be honest. Let them know you may need some time to process everything, but acknowledge that it is *your* problem to work out and not their responsibility.
6. Remember that you cannot and should not try to change them—you have an opportunity here to support, not to reform them.
7. Ask what you can do to support them or what they need from you right now.
8. Follow up. The coming out conversation should be the first of many. Continue to check in and ask questions over time.
9. Be open to socializing with their new friends and in a variety of settings, both LGBT and straight. Let them know that they don't have to compartmentalize their lives.
10. Be an advocate. Read up on LGBT issues, wear an LGBT-friendly button or sticker, join a GSA or other LGBT group, and confront homophobia in whatever ways you can.