

Coming Out

Many people have realised that living their lives in the “closet” robs them of a full, rewarding life and forces them to live in fear and shame. Hiding ones sexual preferences can indeed cause great stress.

However, “coming out” does not mean telling everybody one meets that one is gay, lesbian or bisexual. What it does mean is that the person is no longer worrying about being found out by friends, family or colleagues. In essence “coming out” is a process that allows a person to be in touch with his/her sexuality and to express themselves accordingly.

When people have discussed how they came out, many 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, as coming out can be a stressful and difficult process, especially when family and friends react negatively, but in time people have said that they are happier out of the closet.

In many countries around the world coming out is also a political act. 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 familiarise the broader populations with homosexuality.

The Development of Sexual Orientation

People with predominately same sex orientation show similar stages of identity development - with individual variations of course. The following model or framework may provide a useful way of understanding this development. Not every individual follows each stage. It is also common for some people to work on the developmental tasks related to several different stages simultaneously.

Stage 1

Pre-Coming Out

Many people may be uncertain about their sexual identity. Time may be needed to explore this. It is possible that at a conscious or pre-conscious level the child and family members know that even then the child's sexual orientation ‘differs’. A major conflict is created for the child, the family and ultimately society when the child appears to be about to break with the expectation of getting married. Often the young person feels alienated and ‘different’. Fear of rejection and ridicule create a barrier to 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 feelings may lead to behavioural problems, psychosomatic illness, depression, low self-esteem and even suicide. Others may sublimate their feelings and become intensely absorbed in some socially valued activity such as school work, religion, music or art - where being alone is not regarded as being strange.

Facing the personal crisis of being different is a healthy approach to adopt. This is the process of “coming out”. It can begin at any age depending on a number of factors including family, personality and friends.

Stage 2

Coming Out

The first step in “coming out” is “outing” yourself to yourself - acknowledging what you feel and who you are. The vast majority of people who have recurring homosexual thoughts or experiences are homosexual, although they often do not admit this. This first step in identifying yourself as gay, lesbian or bisexual can take many years to complete. Self-identifying is a way of starting the “coming out” process. In a way you cannot fully tell other people you are gay or lesbian until you have told yourself. At the same time, sharing this fact with someone else can function as the beginning of self acceptance.

One technique to help in this process is to look at yourself in the mirror, see yourself for who you are, accept yourself looking back for who you are and say “I am gay”, “I am lesbian” or “I am bisexual”. Say it slowly over and over again. Another exercise is to find a quiet place to go for a walk. Bring a piece of paper and a pen. Write at the top of the sheet of paper “I am gay” or “I am lesbian” or “I am bisexual”. In another column write all the negative words and phrases used against homosexuals. Read and face the words used against gay and lesbian people. By doing this you can help yourself to become desensitised to these reactions.

It is important that you choose carefully the people to whom you disclose your homosexuality. 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 that you keep control over the “coming out” process. Once you gain acceptance from a number of people, it is much easier to withstand rejection. There is always the possibility that people will react negatively. It is important, therefore, 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 for them to need time to digest the news.

There are many reasons why parents may not be the first family members you tell. Parents may not necessarily be directly involved in your life any longer. You may be closer to your siblings and may wish to “come out” to them first. Many parents have expectations of their children, whether straight or gay, that children can rarely meet. It is often hard on parents when their children do not meet those expectations. Therefore, unlike when straight friends find out about the gay person’s sexuality, parents may feel as if they are being told that part of them is homosexual. It is possible that parents may accept that their child is gay immediately; however this may not be the case. They may not have a positive reaction at first. Whether or not parents and other family members accept your homosexuality, your life will alter dramatically. Not only have you ‘come out’ but you have done so with the most important, closest heterosexual people in your life.

Searching for gay friends and companions no longer centres on 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.

When you 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. However, developing a family of gay friends is not something that is accomplished over a short period. It takes time to develop friendships and bonds with people.

Stage 3

Exploration / Experimentation

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

Stage 4

Initial Relationships

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

Stage 5

Integration

This is an ongoing process of development where new feelings about yourself continue to emerge. Reintegration and self definition takes place. Public and private identities are incorporated into a coherent self image. Relationships at this point can be more successful.

Some More Help

The following reading may be helpful:

Byrne, S. and Larkin, J. (1994) Coming out: a book for lesbians and gay men of all ages Dublin: Marello Books

D'Angell, A.R. and 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

Remember

The DCU Counselling and Personal Development Service is available to you as a service resource so please feel free to phone 01 700 5165 or email counselling@dcu.ie if you would like to make an appointment.