

COMING OUT TO FAMILY AND FRIENDS

©2009 Pandora's Project

By Katy

“There is no one right or wrong way to come out. It’s a lifelong process of being ever more open and true with yourself and others — done in your own way and in your own time” (HRC, 2008).

For the vast majority of GLBT people, thinking about “coming out” to family and friends is something we consider at some point in our lives. Some of us go on and do it, others make the decision to not involve their family in that part of their life. This article looks at some of the reasons people may chose to come out or not, before going on to explore some of the ways you can prepare yourself for taking the plunge!

What are some of the reasons for coming out to family and friends?

To be yourself:

Quite simply, coming out to family and friends affords you the opportunity to be the person you really are! To celebrate in that person you are and be proud of all that you are. This can increase self-esteem and self-confidence.

Decreasing stress:

Living part of your life in secrecy can be exhausting and stressful as you are consistently having to be on your guard about everything you say and do in case you let something slip. Coming out means that. hopefully, you will be able to live your life more openly and honestly with those around you who matter.

Being part of the GLBT community:

The GLBT community can be a strong, uniting and vibrant force to be a part of. It can offer

you acceptance for who you are, the ability to rejoice in your relationships without fear of condemnation, and advocacy for any GLBT issues. In a society where homosexuality is often associated with very negative connotations, it is refreshing and validating to be part of a community which views you as "normal".

To be able to have more honest and genuine relationships with people:

Being able to share everything you are with people you love *can* be wonderfully fulfilling and lead to more meaningful and closer relationships.

Standing up and being counted:

Coming out means that non-LGBT people are introduced to GLBT issues that ordinarily would be swept under the carpet. It helps to dispel the stereotypes about what it means to be gay, with the hope that this will lead to increased tolerance and understanding of us and our relationships. It also helps to pave the way for other GLBT people who will come through in the future.

To involve your partner in family / social life:

If you have a significant other, its understandable that you would want to share important occasions with your partner - which includes public holidays, family celebrations, dinner parties, weddings etc. This can be incredibly awkward if the importance of your relationship is unknown. Therefore coming out means that others will be aware that you are a partnership, and so *hopefully* treat you as a partnership.

What are the risks of coming out?

There are obviously some risks of coming out, which must be considered when making the decision about whether to come out or not.

Intolerance:

Unfortunately, the likelihood is that not everyone that you come out to is going to be accepting or understanding of your disclosure. People you tell could reject you, become

angry at you, feel uncomfortable around you, judge you, avoid you, get upset for you, be disappointed in you, discriminate against you etc. This can obviously be very upsetting and traumatic to deal with and can have far-reaching consequences.

Relationships may change:

Even very strong relationships can be changed in the process of coming out. Often these relationships may revert back to how they were before once the initial shock has worn off, but other times, the relationship may be changed forever.

Invalidation:

Some may find that certain people they disclose to are invalidating of their claims regarding their sexuality. For example, they may conclude it is "just a phase" you're going through, or that you're confused, or that you're quite simply, "being ridiculous". Others may dismiss you as being sinful or of being mentally ill and in need of treatment.

The loss of financial support:

If you are in a position where your parents are still financially supporting you or providing you with somewhere to live, there is the possibility that they may withdraw this. Hopefully, this won't be the case, but the possibility needs to be considered.

Preparing yourself for coming out

It's YOUR decision:

Coming out has to be your decision because it's you that has to live with the consequences. There can be a lot of pressure put on a person to come out (or not to come out) – but ultimately, you are the one in charge – and the responsibility lies with you alone.

Pressure to disclose may come from other friends and family members who are aware that you are GLBT, or from an "out" partner who doesn't want to keep your relationship secret, or in fact from the GLBT community itself because they feel that you're hiding it equates to

being ashamed. Similarly, there may be pressure put on you to keep your sexuality a secret – for example, if your parents have made it clear that it will be a source of shame, or if your partner is not ready to come out. Obviously all of these things need to be taken in consideration when making a decision, but ultimately you have to do what is right for you.

The saying goes that “honesty is the best policy”, but it has to be at a time and in a way that is right for you and those you care about. Knowing that you are the one in control is not always comforting because many GLBT people just wish that everyone could magically “know” so they can not be held accountable for the consequences or for potentially upsetting the status quo. However, if you are thinking of coming out, you have to decide who, when, where – and how.

Who do you want to tell?

Generally, when we think about “coming out” we have an idea about which people it is we’d like to come out to. It is rare for someone to come out to everybody all at once – but instead its usually based on telling select people first. Who those select people are will be different for everyone and based on their own criteria, but its likely to be people who matter to us – which in some ways can make it even harder as their opinions matter more also.

We may have some preconceptions about how the people we choose to tell are likely to react. This judgment may be based on how tolerant / prejudiced they are in general, and how they react to GLBT-related issues in general. If they are someone who, for example, uses disrespectful names to refer to gay people, then the chances are that they are not going to be accepting of your sexuality either. If you want to test the water, you could try bringing up a GLBT issue and see how they react, or talk about a celebrity / friend who is openly gay and gauge their response. Obviously their reaction to a general issue does not guarantee that they will react in the same way to you – but it certainly gives some sort of indication.

Be informed about GLBT issues:

The chances are that whoever you tell will either have questions or will have some sort of stereotypical myth that will concern them. Therefore, it is a good idea if you can make sure you are aware of GLBT issues so that you can inform them or answer their questions to the best of your ability. For example, as a survivor, someone may believe that you are GLBT because of your sexual assault, and so having been able to think this through yourself before they bring it up will allow you to be clearer with them. The clearer you can be about issues, the clearer you will be able to explain the situation to them – which should increase your chances of a positive outcome.

How confident do you feel about being GLBT?

The way in which you feel about your sexuality can very much be conveyed to the person you are coming out to. For example, if you sound ashamed when coming out, this shame could be picked up by the other person and would not set the best starting point to foster acceptance.

What do you want to say?

Think about exactly what it is you want to say to them and how you're going to say it. For example, if you identify (or label) yourself as "gay" or "bisexual" etc. then check out with yourself first that this is how you want to be identified by others. This is about making yourself clear and sending a clear message out to others. It may be that you don't want to be as definite with them as this as you may still be slightly confused about your sexuality, and therefore it may be safer to say something like "I am attracted to other men" without pushing yourself into a box. Some believe that they shouldn't come out until you have made a definite decision about your sexuality, but I believe it's okay to say if you are still uncertain - the important thing is to convey the way you feel, rather than tattooing a label on yourself to make it clearer for others.

Get support:

Coming out is, for many people, incredibly hard. It may be helpful to have someone who you trust who can help you prepare for coming out to other loved ones – and then obviously it can be reassuring to know there is someone to support you if things don't go according to plan. Even where loved ones end up being very supportive of their GLBT friend / relative, initially there may be a period of shock and / or uncertainty which can be very disconcerting for the person coming out. Think about who you have in your life who you can turn to for support at this time. A partner? A friend who already knows? A counselor? Another GLBT person who has been through this process? A support line for GLBT people?

Is it the right time?

Timing is important. Try to choose a time that is right for you, and also right for the person you are coming out to. If the person you are coming out to is dealing with their own personal stresses, or if they are unwell, or busy, they may be unable to respond constructively to you. Therefore it's a good idea to plan this for a time when you are both going to have the time and energy to process and deal with the outcome.

It is obviously not a good idea to blurt this out in the middle of an argument – again as a tensions are already likely to be high and therefore responses are unlikely to be constructive.

It's hard – but try to be patient.

What do you hope to achieve by telling them? What do you want from them?

It can help to be clear with them about the reasons you are telling them, and what it is exactly that you want from them. Very often, people may be unsure about how they are supposed to react, and so giving them a helping hand by explaining what it is you are looking for can be very helpful.

What kind of response may you get?

We all have an ideal in our head about how we would most like someone to react to us when we come out to them. Some have been lucky and have got just the response they were looking for, but possibly more often than not, the immediate response is a long way from the ideal.

The first thing to remember is to be patient. The person you've told may just need time to process what it is you've told them, especially if their *gaydar* was so poor they had no idea beforehand! 😊. Just because positive responses do not happen immediately does not mean that a little way down the road that this won't change. Coming out is a process. The initial conversation is just the beginning of what will hopefully be an on-going dialogue and process of understanding between you and the other person.

It is believed that there are five generic stages that people can experience in response to someone they love telling them they are GLBT. Obviously, not everyone goes through these stages in the same order, and some may not progress all the way through the stages but instead become fixated at an earlier stage.

The five stages are considered to be shock, denial, guilt, expression of feelings, true acceptance.

Shock:

This can manifest in just being completely dumbstruck and not knowing what to say or how to respond. We've all been in that position at times where we're not sure we heard properly, or are convinced that somehow we've misinterpreted what someone said. People in shock can come across as cold or uncaring. Try to remember how long it has taken you to come to terms with your own sexuality, and then ask yourself whether it is fair that we expect a parent to just accept it straight off when they've had no preparation. This shock can last for a few hours or a few months - and its impossible to move forward until this has worn off.

Some parents admit that they've known or suspected for quite some time and in this circumstance the shock phase is likely to be very short.

Denial:

The "I don't believe it" or "It's just a phase" stage. Denial helps the person to protect themselves from a message they find very difficult to hear. There are a lot of myths thrown around in our society about sexuality, and to some extent, its understandable that family members may latch onto some of these in an attempt to explain why you're saying your GLBT. If it's "just a phase" or if your simply mistaken(!) then they don't have to go any further at dealing with it. They can effectively stick their head in the sand and wait for the storm to pass.

It's at this stage that its important for you to be very clear and firm about how you feel, but at the same time take it at a pace that you feel they can cope with. For example, if they are not taking on board what you're telling them, its pointless to pile more information on top of this because they simply will not take it in and it may cause them to put up even more barriers. Therefore it is more useful to repeat what you have already told them, be clear about it, and give them time to process it. It may be that you have to leave something with them for a time, and then if the haven't bought it up again within a few days, you can gently return to it.

Guilt:

The "Its all my fault" or "What did I do wrong" phase. Parents, in particular, may feel very strongly that their children are GLBT because of something they did or didn't do right during childhood i.e. there has been some form of flaw in their parenting skills. We all like to be able to find reasons for why something is the way it is, and its often not enough for any of us to just say "It's the way it is because its just the way it is".

Be very clear with them that you do not hold them responsible for being GLBT and it is not as a result of any failings in their parenting skills. It may be helpful to have some literature for them to read in their own time about various theories that homosexuality occues i.e. the

gene debate.

Similarly, particularly religious people may view having a GLBT child as a punishment from God – and may feel guilt for a particular sin they may have committed or believe that you are guilty of a sin and this is your punishment. It's very hard to fight religious belief, but hopefully further processing will lead them away from this conclusion.

Expressions of feelings:

People react in a whole variety of ways that are far too numerous to list here, but its important that people are given the opportunity to express their own feelings on the issue so that they are able to move on. The expression of these feelings can be positive or negative and each are equally valid. That's not to say, of course, that you have to agree or be happy with any of the expressions made, but simply to accept that's the way they feel about it at that moment in time.

They may:

Grieve the dreams that they had for you that may now not be. i.e. they may have dreamed of the perfect white wedding, or of being grandparents etc.

Feel embarrassed of what the neighbours will say, or how to react when you are with your partner. They may ask you to keep it secret.

Feel honoured that you have shared this with them.

Love you just the same.

Feel disappointed at you or for you.

Get angry. Apportion blame.

Reject you or your lifestyle.

Embrace you.

Argue that "it's not normal" - Explain that although its not the norm, its normal for you. You can use analogies, such as – although most people are right-handed, some are left handed.

They may surprise you. Be prepared that people do not always react in the way you believed they would.

During this phase, try not to assume prejudice. Although the person may say something that you consider to be unsupportive, invalidating or homophobic, its important to check out with them what they mean. They may phrase something poorly, or be basing their ideas on an incorrect myth or a stereotype – and therefore it may not be prejudice driving certain expressions, but more a general ignorance about GLBT issues. This is where, hopefully, you will be able to educate them on any misconceptions they may have.

It can be a good idea to have a leaflet or a book that is written for parents of gay children which they can go through when they are ready in their own time. It may also be useful to give them a hotline number that they can ring if they feel the need to talk this over with them.

Remember that parents (and other family members) are emotionally attached and it may be tough for them to understand things in an intellectual or logical way as their emotions may hinder this process.

It can be a good idea to remind them that, despite what you've shared with them, you are exactly the same person today as you were yesterday. Nothing within you has changed – and infact the only thing that has changed is that you've shared something important with them.

Acceptance or not?:

There can effectively be three outcomes:

They can reject you or what you've told them entirely and it can be a source of constant warfare. Although this is the outcome people fear the most, it is thankfully also the most rare.

They can continue to accept and love you, but they do not fully accept your sexuality. It may be that, over time, the level of acceptance can change as they become more comfortable with the various issues.

They can fully accept you and your sexuality and support the decisions you have made. The true acceptance is usually something which happens gradually.

Help for if you are thinking of coming out

UK:

London Friend: Helpline: 020 7837 3337. Offers counselling, support and information services to lesbians, gay men, bisexuals and those unsure of their sexual identity.

Lesbian and Gay Switchboard: Helpline: 020 7837 7324.

<http://pspcore.org.uk>"%5dPeer%20Support:%20%5b/url%5d%20Youthline:%200800%201697384.%20

%5burl="www.akt.org.uk" target="_blank">The Albert Kennedy Trust: Aims to ensure that all lesbian, gay and bisexual young people are able to live in accepting, supportive and caring homes.

Imaan: For email advice to gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgendered Muslims, their family, and supporters and those questioning their sexuality or gender identity.

Jewish Lesbian and Gay Helpline: Tel: 020 8952 0137. Provides support to GLBT people and their families.

USA:

Toll-free 1-888-THE-GLNH (1-888-843-4564)

National Gay and Lesbian Youth Hotline, 1-800-347-TEEN (Weekend Nights Only)

Gay & Lesbian Switchboard of NY Project Mon-Fri 4pm-8pm EST, Saturday noon-5pm EST, 212-989-0999

US: Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender (GLBT) Youth Support Line 800-850-8078

(USA)The Trevor Helpline: 1-866-4-U-TREVOR

Rainbow Youth Hotline: 1-877-LGBT-YTH (1-877-542-8984)

AUSTRALIA:

Gay and Lesbian Helpline: 03 9663 2939

NZ Phone:

NZ Gay Switchboard: (04) 473 7878 between 7.30 & 9.30pm 7 days

Coming Out of Shame : Transforming Gay and Lesbian Lives. Gershen Kaufman, Lev Raphael / Hardcover / Published 1996

Coming Out to Parents : A Two-Way Survival Guide for Lesbians and Gay Men and Their Parents. Mary V. Borhek / Paperback / Published 1993

The Final Closet : The Gay Parents' Guide for Coming Out to Their Children. Rip Corley / Paperback / Published 1990

Outing Yourself : How to Come Out As Lesbian or Gay to Your Family, Friends, and Coworkers. Michelangelo Signorile / Paperback / Published 1996
aught, Brian McNaught / Hardcover / Published 1997

There's Something I've Been Meaning to Tell You. Lorelee MacPike (Editor) / Paperback / Published 1989

Drifting Toward Love: Black, Brown, Gay, and Coming of Age on the Streets of New York, author Kai Wright

This Way Out by Chris Nutter

[Coming Out](#)

[Coming out to your parents brochure \(From FFLAG\)](#)

Help For Family Members

[Acceptance \(UK\)](#): Tel. 01795 661463. An organisation for parents of lesbians and gays.

[Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays \(FFLAG\)](#): Helpline: 01454 852418

[PACE](#): Tel: 020 7700 1323. PACE is a resource for parents, adults, children and professionals to express their concerns, communicate their feelings and better understand what it is to be gay, lesbian or bisexual.

[Pink Parents](#): Tel: 01380 727 935.

[Imaan](#): For email advice to gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgendered Muslims, their family, and supporters and those questioning their sexuality or gender identity.

Jewish Lesbian and Gay Helpline: Tel: 020 8952 0137. Provides support to GLBT people and their families.

AUSTRALIA:

PFLAGG: (Oz) Tel: (03) 9660 3960

US:

PFLAGG Chapters

"Now That You Know; What Every Parent Should Know About Homosexuality," by Fairchild and Hayward; Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1989

Beyond Acceptance. Carolyn Welch Griffin, Marina J. Wirth & Arthur G. Wirth. New York, NY. St. Martin's Press, 1997.

Straight Parents/Gay Children. Robert A. Bernstein. New York, NY. Thunder's Mouth Press, 1995.

This article is copyrighted and unauthorized reproduction is prohibited. If you wish to use this article online or in print, please contact admin@pandys.org to request permission. Visit www.PandorasProject.org for more information and articles.

