

Coming Out / Disclosure

Imagine, for a moment, that you are back in high school. Remember your first big crush or your first kiss. Now imagine that you were in that same memory with a same-sex crush. How would your experiences have been different? Now, we'll jump all the way back to elementary school. Because love in America is assumed to be straight, the discovery that one does not fit the mold can be frightening. From the time we are little, we are bombarded with images and sounds of the heterosexual experience in TV, music, movies, books, and fairy tales. We are encouraged to dream about living out the normal straight existence; marriage, kids, white picket fence, etc. by our families, friends, teachers, and religious mentors. Even the big Puberty talk with the school nurse in fifth or sixth grade mentions only the "straight and narrow path."

Young children rarely seem to learn about other people's differences unless they are different. By the time we reach high school and college, many of our prejudices are formed and ingrained, but many aspects about our identities are only beginning to develop. At some point during sexual development, the gay teen/young adult realizes there is something "different" about himself or herself. This realization is the first step to "coming out." The gay youth may feel ashamed, frightened, confused, isolated or may rejoice at this newfound identity. There is a book entitled "Two in Twenty." This book is a series of narratives written by LGBTQ youth in the midst of the coming out process. Some are joyful stories about acceptance and love, while others are about rejection and sadness. The book is a sequel to "One in Ten." The numbers are doubled because the author had hoped that in the ten-year intermission between the two books, the LGBTQ+ movement would come so far, the endless stories of loneliness would be less in number. Unfortunately, the teens who contributed essays to the book still speak of isolation from other queer teens and of overwhelming feelings of being "the only one."

Eventually, the queer teen comes out a little further. They must decide whom to tell about this new discovery. They must figure out who will accept them and who will not. This is one of the most difficult parts of the coming out process. At times, one feels as if everything is on the line: home, family, and friendships. A straight teenager rarely feels this sort of risk when admitting their fondness for the other sex. How might this fear of rejection, labeling, discrimination, and stereotype affect a person's self-image in a negative way? How could they be affected in a positive way?

Luckily, more and more schools have stronger LGBTQ+ supports and resources such as Safe Zone programs, clubs, and mentors.

(By Leah Shier)

Coming Out: Students on Campus

Coming out is the term used to describe the process of and the extent to which one identifies oneself as LGBTQ+. There are two parts to this process: coming out to oneself and coming out to others. Coming out to oneself is perhaps the first step toward a positive understanding of one's identity/orientation. It includes the realization that one is LGBTQ+ and accepting that fact and deciding what to do about it.

Coming out to others is an experience unique to LGBTQ+. The decision to come out to another person involves disclosing one's sexual side, which is for the most part viewed as being a private matter. Some are afraid of being rejected, but others worry that their sexual identity will be the overriding focus in future interactions with the other person. However, coming out does not always result in negative consequences. It can develop a sense of relief and a sense of closeness. Other issues are the extent of the revelation (should everyone know or should disclosure be selective?), timing, and anticipation consequences.

The decision not to come out to others is called passing. Our culture tends to assume heterosexuality/cisgender and persons who do not correct the heterosexual/cisgender assumption are considered to be passing. College students may believe that passing is preferable in an environment built on heterosexual/cisgender events. These students usually experience some conflict as they make decisions on when to pass and when to be open, and some live with fear about their secret being revealed. These students may also experience some hostility from those who are open and feel that they are not being honest with themselves or others.

(Adapted from WPI Safe Zone manual)



WHEN I CAME OUT

Over 1900 stories. Every coming out story is unique. What's yours?

I would say that coming out is not about issuing a press release, wearing a pink triangle, and marching in a gay pride parade. For me, coming out is much simpler. It just means being open and honest about myself with others. I also think that being out is much easier than coming out. Being out just means integrating your sexual orientation into the other aspects of your life, while coming out often involves the drama of sitting someone down and going through many motions.

Keith Boykin, author & political commentator

Choosing to Come Out / Disclose

What's the fear?

- Rejection – loss of relationships
- Gossip
- Shaming
- Harassment/ridicule/verbal abuse
- Being thrown out of the family
- Being thrown out of the house
- Being ostracized from a faith community
- Loss of financial support
- Loss of employment
- Physical violence
- Being vulnerable/unsafe



Why might LGBTQ+ people want to come out to friends, family, and community?

- End of the “hiding game”
- Feel closer to friends, family, and community
- Be able to be “whole” around them
- Stop wasting energy by hiding all the time
- Feel like they have integrity
- To make a statement that “Who I am is OK”

What might someone feel when a loved one comes out to them?

- Honored
- Touched
- Empathetic
- Worried/concerned for their loved one
- Shocked or disbelieving
- Uncomfortable and not sure what to say or do next
- Questioning why the person came out
- Angry, threatened, and/or rejecting

What do people hope for when they come out/disclose?

- Acceptance
- Support
- Understanding
- Comfort
- Closer friendships
- Reassurance that the relationship is safe
- A hug and/or a smile
- Acknowledgment of their feelings/experience and who they are