

Counselling Services

COMING OUT

University is often a time when people think about their identity. Part of that may include querying their sexuality and whether they identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender or heterosexual. It can take a long time to come to terms with sexuality and many people find it a confusing experience.

What is “coming out”?

“Coming out” or “coming out of the closet” are terms that are commonly used when gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people tell others about their sexual identity.

Why do people come out?

Coming out is made necessary because people are often assumed to be heterosexual unless there is evidence otherwise. Keeping a part of yourself secret and worrying that someone will find out consumes a lot of energy, so there is often a release of tension when people stop denying or hiding such an important aspect of their lives. Sharing openly about their lives can be important to how people feel about themselves. Coming out has been found to be strongly related to psychological adjustment, meaning that the more positive a person feels about their sexuality, the better their mental health will be. Another reason people come out is to try to combat stereotypes in society. The people with the most positive attitudes towards homosexuality are those who say they know one or more same-sex attracted people well.

How do most people experience coming out?

Coming out can be very challenging because of stereotypes and prejudice in society. People who are same-sex attracted can feel ‘different’ and alone when they first become aware of their orientation, and they may fear rejection from others. Most people gain some sense of relief once they have come out, and many report increased self esteem, greater honesty and a sense of personal integrity. If you are deciding if you are ready to come out, you might ask yourself, “How comfortable am I with my sexuality?”, “Am I ready for my sexual orientation to be revealed to a range of people?”, “Who would I like to tell?” and “What type of reaction can I expect from others?”.

How do people come out?

Coming out is a very individual process and happens at different ages for different people. It is wise to take your time in thinking about and coming to terms with your sexuality. A good starting point is recognising your own sexual identity and working towards self-acceptance. This may include focusing on the positive aspects of being gay as opposed to the fears and myths. Often people come out initially to other people in the gay community. This can help them to feel less isolated and more supported as others can share their experiences with them. The next step, and possibly the most challenging, is coming out to family and friends. To start off with, you may want to gauge how accepting certain people are from the things they say when gay-related issues come up. You might try to raise it by talking about a TV show or movie, or in debates about equal rights.

Things to consider if you are planning to come out:

- The first person you tell should be someone you trust who you believe will be open-minded and supportive.
- Some people prefer to tell one parent before the other. Others feel more comfortable writing a letter as this allows space for the other person’s initial reaction before discussing it directly.
- Think about the time and place that would be best to bring up the topic.
- Be prepared for initial negative reactions from some people. Other people’s reactions will depend on their particular social, cultural and religious backgrounds and beliefs. They may need more time to adjust to the idea.
- Remind the person you are the same individual you were yesterday.



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COMING OUT (cont.)

- Have friends available to talk about what happens. You might need some back-up accommodation for a while if you live with your family. • Try not to let your self esteem depend on the approval of others.
- Be prepared for others finding out very quickly once you have told someone.
- Be prepared for a range of questions that others may ask and work out some responses you could make.

What can help:

- **Get Information.** You may feel more confident in fielding people's questions if you know about the issues involved. Read up on the subject, check out relevant websites or talk to someone face-to-face or over the phone. You might consider using search terms like SEXUALITY,GAY,BISEXUAL or similar words. Make sure you get information about safe sex.
- **Get some support.** Many people find the transition easier with support from trusted friends, family or a counsellor. It may be useful to gain support from other people who are in the gay community. There are also religious agencies in the community that are gay-friendly. Here are a few ideas about places that can provide support:
 - **QUT Counselling Services**
 - **Gay and Lesbian Welfare Association**
Phone: 3891 7377 or www.glwa.org.au
 - **Gayline 3891 7377 or Lesbianline 3891 7388**
 - **Queensland Health – Sexual Health Services 3227 8666**
 - **QUT Student Guild Queer Portfolio**
Level 1, C Block, Kelvin Grove
Phone: 3138 5511 or <http://www.guildonline.net/sgdsp/dispsite.php?groupsiteseq=1&pageseq=36>
 - **Queensland AIDS Council (QuAC)**
runs StepOut workshops for same-sex attracted men.
Phone: (07) 3017 1738/3844 1990 or website www.afao.org.au

Websites

- www.reachout.asn.au (Select 'Sexuality and coming out')
- www.avert.org (About HIV/AIDS)
- www.qrd.org/qrd

QUT Counselling Services offers professional assistance with this and other issues

Kelvin Grove 3138 3488

Gardens Point 3138 2383

Caboolture 5316 7400

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