

Before Coming Out: Questions to Reflect On

The coming out process is different for each person and in each situation. Before an individual decides to come out, it could be helpful to evaluate these suggestions in light of her or his own personal situation and needs. Allies can assist friends who are Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender, Two-Spirited and Questioning (GLBTTQ) by helping them consider these issues in their process of deciding whether to come out.

Are you sure about your sexual orientation and/or gender identity?

Don't raise the issue unless you're able to respond with confidence to the question, "Are you sure?" Confusion on your part will increase others' confusion and decrease their confidence in your judgment.

Are you comfortable with your sexual and/or gender identity?

Be clear about your own feelings about being GLBTTQ. If you're wrestling with guilt or depression, get help in getting over that before coming out to others. Coming out can require a lot of energy and a reserve of positive self-image. If you are comfortable with your identity, those to whom you come out will often sense that, and have an easier time accepting your disclosure.

Do you have support?

In the event you get a negative reaction, there should be someone or a group that you can turn to for emotional support and strength. Maintaining your sense of self-worth is critical.

Are you well informed about homosexuality and/or gender variance?

The reactions of others will most likely be based on a lifetime of information from a homophobic society with conventional ideas about gender norms. If you've done some serious reading on the subject, you'll be prepared to answer their concerns and questions with reliable and accurate information. Know some books that you can share with others who might want to know more or have a contact name for a PFLAG chapter.

Is this a good time?

Timing can be very important. Be aware of the mood, priorities, stresses, and problems of those with whom you would like to share your identity. Choose a time when they're not dealing with major life concerns. What people are dealing with in their own lives may affect their receptivity to your news.

Can you be patient?

Others will require time to deal with this new information. Remember that it took many of us a very long time to come to terms with our sexuality and/or gender identity. When you come out to others, be prepared to give them time to adjust and to comprehend what they learned. Don't expect immediate acceptance, but try instead to establish an ongoing, caring dialogue.

What's your motive for coming out now?

Hopefully, it is because you care about the people you intend to come out to, and you are uncomfortable with the distance you feel between you and them. Never come out in anger or during an argument, using your sexuality as a weapon.

Have you tried to anticipate others' reactions?

Consider your general relationship with those to whom you intend to come out. What might their concerns be? How can you address those concerns? What message do you want to send? For example, try to affirm mutual caring and love before disclosing your news. Emphasize that you are still the same person. (An excellent book to help you consider these questions is *Coming Out: An Act of Love* by Rob Eichberg.)

Have you thought about how you will respond to negative reactions?

Be prepared that your revelation may surprise, anger, or upset others at first. Try not to react angrily or defensively. Try to let others be honest about their initial feelings, even if they are negative. Remember that the initial reaction may not be the long-term one. Keep the lines of communication open with people to whom you come out. Respond to their questions and remember that they are probably in the process of re-examining the myths and stereotypes that we all have been exposed to. If you are rejected by someone, do not lose sight of your own self-worth. Remember that your coming out was a gift of sharing an important part of yourself that that person has chosen to reject.

Is this your decision?

Remember that the decision to come out is yours — you can decide when, where, how, and to whom you wish to come out. Don't be guilt tripped or pressured into it before you're ready. Coming out decisions must be made carefully, and only you can weigh the potential benefits and the potential consequences.

Summary:

Coming out is an on-going process, not a single event. All GLBTTQ people have to make decisions about when and to whom to come out almost every day. Remember that you have the right to ask anyone to whom you come out not to share your disclosure with others. You may want to role play and practice before you tell someone. Although coming out gets a little easier the more you do it, it's important that your words and thoughts be well chosen. Whenever you come out, reflect upon the experience and learn from it, because there will always be a next time.

Safe Spaces: Adapted from Northern Illinois University's Safe Zone manual.