

“Coming Out” Do I? Don’t I?



A guide for LGBTIQ young people on how
and when to tell parents and loved ones
about their sexual or gender diversity

by Shelley Argent

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This is a booklet written to assist those who may be questioning their gender or sexual diversity.

While in no way answering all questions, this booklet covers common issues, concerns and questions that those in the process of “coming out” often ask themselves.

We hope it proves helpful to those beginning their journey of self-awareness and honesty as lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans*, intersex, queer or questioning (LGBTIQ).

Good luck and don't be rushed into making hasty decisions.

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INTRODUCTION

Issues of gender diversity or sexual orientation are surrounded by misunderstanding and this makes it very difficult for a person who feels “different”.

Some people believe if they try very hard to behave as society and family expect, they can change their feelings and “become straight”. Some people think that in mouthing homophobic and transphobic messages, they prove their “straightness”. That’s not how life goes.

Sexual orientation is not a choice. It’s in your make-up, pre-determined for you just as your eye colour is, or your hair, your height or your ability to curl your tongue.

To accept yourself for who you are can take time. You may feel anxious, excited, confused, and lonely. Why do you feel different to your friends? Why isn’t anyone else like you? Why do you feel the way you do?

Coming to terms with being LGBTIQQ means being comfortable in yourself and living a true life, not a life full of lies. And it’s at that point that you can consider when and how to inform family and friends.

Am I LGBTIQQ?

Who knows! No one can tell you if you are or not.

Some people realise from an early age that they are “different” but just can’t quite understand what the difference is.

For some, it’s a slow realisation over a long period of time while others may suddenly “get it” from a simple trigger such as relating to a TV soapie character.

Some people wrestle with their “difference” while others accept it. Be patient. You can’t rush the process of deciding Yes or No.

Am I really?

It is best to be confident and comfortable with your decision before disclosing your sexual or gender diversity to family.

Uncertainty and age can confuse the issue, particularly if you are very young. Many parents don't want to hear this news from their child at any age and will look for reasons to discount what you're saying.

They may cling to the hope that you are "confused" or that you are "just experimenting" and not take your decision seriously. They don't understand that you are being honest with them about your feelings.

What does it feel like?

You don't have to feel any different to what you do now. Being LGBTIQQ is no different than being straight except you may feel more pressure to disclose your sexual or gender diversity to loved ones. And then there's the impending stress or fear of their reaction to deal with.

What do I have to do to be sure I am LGBTIQQ?

Absolutely nothing! Straight people don't do anything to prove their sexuality and you don't have to either. Your sexuality or gender diversity is not about having partners, and hanging out at bars and nightclubs. Just be yourself, take your time and things will evolve naturally for you.

Is it just a phase?

No. If you have come to the decision that you are LGBTIQQ, there is very little likelihood that you will change and "become straight" again. Statistics show that straights become LGBTIQQ but very rarely do LGBTIQQ become straight. This has to do with concealing true identity until the person can no longer keep the secret.

How do I know and what are the signs of being LGBTIQQ?

This is the most common question asked. Many who are questioning their sexual or gender diversity hope there is a recipe to clarify their feelings. Unfortunately there are no factual signs.

LGBTIQQ people work in all industries and have varied interests. They cannot be (nor should they be) stereotyped. A male does not have to act effeminately to be gay just as not all lesbians dress like men.

When should I disclose?

It is best to be absolutely certain of your feelings before disclosing. This doesn't mean you must have had partners.

You simply need to be comfortable in yourself so that when the questions start (and they will), you can be confident in your decision and answers.

There are stages of "coming out":

- Acceptance of self – coming to terms with being LGBTIQQ
- Sorting out feelings and feeling good about yourself
- Telling loved ones
- Not caring about who knows your sexual orientation.

Ask yourself these questions to help determine when you are ready:

- Are you comfortable with yourself?
- Do you have support if things go wrong when disclosing?
- Can you answer, and are you prepared emotionally to answer, the questions you may be asked about being LGBTIQQ?
- Can you be patient with family members while they come to terms with this information about you?

Unfortunately, there is no GOOD time, just better times than others, to tell family members about being LGBTIQQ.

When not to tell

At family functions, during celebrations.

During an argument – your parents are likely to think you are just trying to hurt them.

If you have even a niggle of uncertainty about your feelings.

When there are serious problems or dramas happening in the family.

How do I not tell?

Always be careful on social media. Parents are never happy if they find out on Facebook.

Before you say anything

Experience shows that before saying anything you need to have:

outside emotional support.

somewhere to stay - in case the news is badly received.

some financial independence.

Who do I tell?

This answer depends on many factors including your age, how long you have known about being LGBTIQ and whether you still live with family.

How do I tell?

How you go about making this important decision depends on different factors. Consider which of these may work best for you...

A letter

Writing your disclosure allows you to state your thoughts and emotions calmly without being side-tracked by questions of emotions from family members.

A phone call

A phone call is good if you want to tell your parents but can't actually face them, or are in fear of a bad reaction.

Face-to-face

Even if you normally have a good relationship with your parents, "coming out" may make you incredibly anxious. Pick your time: wait for the household to be quiet and (relatively) stress-free.

Will you tell both parents at the same time or individually? If possible, don't ask one parent to keep the secret of your sexual or gender diversity from the other parent for long. This can cause incredible stress particularly between partners who share information readily and freely between each other.

If you feel the need to have someone with you for support during the disclosure, try to choose someone you and your parents both trust, who can provide emotional support for them as well. It's best to keep your partner out of it. Your parents, in their shock or anger, may turn on your partner in search of blame. You know it is not true but parents aren't always rational!

It can be reassuring for some parents to have information (websites or phone numbers) provided to access information quickly. This helps to hasten the understanding of your decision. You are also demonstrating your seriousness and reinforcing that you have researched the issues concerning them prior to your decision. We suggest you read as much information as you can to inform your parents about yourself, and give them as much reading material for them to read later.

If parents suggest you need counselling, request that they go as well. This gives them an objective person to discuss their feelings with and helps them understand sooner. Just make sure the counsellor is LGBTIQQ-friendly.

No matter what way you choose to tell your parents – or anyone else – do not apologise. You have done nothing wrong.

How will my family react?

All families are unique and how they handle the news will vary. While some families may be immediately accepting, do be prepared for some tears, disbelief, shock or denial which may last just a few weeks or months.

Just as it has taken you time to feel comfortable with your sexual or gender diversity, family members will need time too. Usually, the first reaction is shock or disbelief. This is when parents are more likely to say things they later regret

Parents often feel disappointment because you will not be travelling the traditional path that they, as parents, automatically assumed. Who is to say that you'd have fulfilled their dream future if you were heterosexual?

Talk with them about your feelings and theirs. They need to understand you cannot change your sexuality, just like they can't change theirs. It is natural for you.

Remind them gently of how they've raised you to be honest. In telling them of your sexual or gender diversity, you are being honest with them about your life: you "came out" to them because you love them and did not want to be dishonest with them.

When they are ready, your family probably will want to ask questions.

These are the most common:

Are you sure this isn't a phase?

What did we do wrong?

Were we bad parents?

How do you know? You haven't had a girlfriend! or How can you be - if you have had a girlfriend - if you are male

How do you know? You haven't been out with a boy! or But you've had boyfriends - if you are female

Have you seen a doctor/counsellor?

Will you see a doctor/counsellor?

Try to think, beforehand, of questions they may ask you and have answers ready.

What if my parents act like nothing has happened?

There is a difference between understanding and seeing your orientation as being a non issue and denial. Denial is a common defence mechanism for parents. Many say “Oh well, it’s his/her choice” and then pretend nothing has changed.

Some refuse to acknowledge your sexuality and others change the subject whenever it is raised. If parents don’t talk about your sexuality or your life, bring it up casually in conversation. Eventually conversation and information serve to desensitise and your family will feel more comfortable with you and your life.

If they continue to struggle with your decision, encourage your family to seem support. PFLAG is a great support for parents.

Mum is over-reacting!

Parents are instinctively protective. Your news may fill your parents with fear — about your safety, health issues, acceptance in the workplace, relationships, your future and what people will think of you (and them).

It’s common for parents to assume the worst will happen, whatever that may be in their minds. It’s worth remembering also that your parents may have limited knowledge and exposure to homosexuality: they may be operating from myths and stereotypes.

Parents often have genuine concerns for their child

You can help reassure your parent by providing facts. Understanding quiets those worries. Discuss your parents’ concerns openly and respectfully to put them at ease and they’ll soon see you are still you.

Again, give them time. They will soon realise their fears and concerns have not eventuated and feel more relaxed about the whole issue.

How can I handle my parents' reactions?

Sometimes parents just need some time before they begin to understand what is happening and can be supportive. They may also want some time alone to digest the news. "Coming out" creates anxiety for everyone.

Try to show empathy towards your parents by answering questions honestly and without anger. We can't control other peoples' emotions and reactions but we can control our own.

What about MY feelings?

Informing parents about your sexual or gender diversity is usually the hardest thing you may ever have to do as a LGBTIQQ person. It is hugely emotional. You may be worried about disappointing your parents, or embarrassing your siblings. You may be scared of friends' reactions.

You may feel alone. Some young people feel like running away from everyone because they're sure the whole world is about to reject them. It is worth remembering that one in five families has a gay member. Nearly everyone knows a LGBTIQQ person, whether they realise it or not.

It is also important to remember most LGBTIQQ move through the experience of "coming out" relatively unscathed even though at the time it may be scary.

Yes there will be tough days with family and this is why we suggest to be sure in yourself. Have information for them and support for yourself. Be prepared for questions and have answers ready.

Here are some ways to find support:

- Call the AIDS Council in your state and seek information about support groups

- Check the internet for information

- Confide in friends, whether they are gay or straight.

When you do “come out” there are many agencies and social groups where you can meet and make friends. In these groups, you will meet people who have all travelled the path of “coming out” ahead of you, and can share their stories and offer support.

How do I introduce my partner or friends?

Parents need time to come to terms with your news and so give them a little time before you introduce your partner and friends. If they want to meet your friends and are trying to be supportive, invite friends home. Just don't expect a sleep over!

How do I tell my friends?

It is often recommended to “come out” to family and friends at about the same time. This is done with the intention of diminishing gossip and lets you be open with your life sooner.

When informing “straight” friends about your sexual or gender diversity, be positive and assertive. Let them know you aren't seeking sympathy, permission or moral support. Let them know you are comfortable in yourself.

You are just giving them the news. You want them to know the real you and you feel they need to know about your sexual or gender diversity so an honest friendship can continue and you don't have to pretend or continue the lie any longer.

Friends may be stunned or shocked at first. Give them time to digest the news. Remember, you didn't come to terms with your sexuality immediately and they may not either.

If by chance you lose friendships because of your disclosure, it won't be the end of the world. Perhaps they were never really a true friend. Never lose sight of your own self-worth and the importance of honesty with self.

For those who have strong religious beliefs you may feel you are going against your God's word. If so, this can be very concerning, but speak to others in similar positions if possible. And, just know that regardless of your religious faith there are many LGBTIQQ people, probably struggling as much as you.

Many religious bodies have support groups for LGBTIQQ people it's just a matter of seeking them out. If you can't find a group specific to your beliefs find another similar one that is supportive.

Do I need to say anything at work?

When you have come out to family members and friends, the next step to consider is your workplace. There is an argument that "it is none of their business".

However, the reality is workplaces create webs of interactions and relationships. You may spend a lot of your time with colleagues and if you're worrying about "fitting in" or being accepted, you can't have your mind on the job. Only you can decide the best way to move forward with this issue.

Weigh up your own workplace. Sometimes people keep themselves unnecessarily in the closet by underestimating the people around them. If you are waiting for the ultimate work environment, you will wait forever. If you feel comfortable enough and willing to take the risk, go ahead and disclose.

There may be surprise and people may need time to digest the news, but ultimately you will be happier long term by being honest with the world.

Some people believe an off-handed remark works well with work colleagues when they ask about flatmates, partners or what you did on the weekend. This lets the workmate know without having to make comment.

A final word or two

Many people have worked through the same issues before you and many more will travel a similar path after you. Only one person holds the key to deciding whether to “come out”: you.

If you’re unsure and have no one to discuss your feelings with, don’t worry, your true sexuality will become clear in time. You don’t need to “do” anything to be sure – and there is no rush.

When you do finally “come out” to family, try to be sensitive to your family’s emotions but don’t allow their sensitivity to have you carrying your sexual or gender diversity a secret or living a lie. Always keep in mind you have done nothing wrong and neither has your family.

Anonymous information and/or ongoing support and referrals to other groups can be accessed through these agencies:

Open Doors

www.opendoors.net.au or 07 3257 7660

An organisation that is supportive of LGBTIQ youth between 12 years under 18 years of age.

Queensland AIDS Council

www.qahc.org.au or 07 3017 1777

Safe sex information, support groups and referrals.

Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG)

www.pflagbrisbane.org.au or 0400 767 832

Emotional support for parents and those in the process of "coming out".

Need further information or additional resources?

PFLAG Brisbane has a wealth of information & resources available for free on our website at www.pflagbrisbane.org.au

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