

## Coming Out

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Coming out means identifying as gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender. The first person you have to reveal this to is yourself. After that, you can deal with friends and family. For many people, the coming out process is difficult. But most people come out because, sooner or later, they can't stand hiding who they are any more. Once they've come out, most people acknowledge that it feels much better to be open and honest than to conceal such an integral part of themselves.

Coming out is simply about being true to yourself — in a world where nearly everyone assumes you are straight. It's not about bringing attention to yourself, as some critics like to say, according to Christopher Rice, author and son of well-known novelist Anne Rice. "People say, 'But you don't have to advertise or flaunt your sexuality if you're gay,'" says Rice, who is gay. "Well, there's a big difference between being forthright and 'flaunting' it."

Sometimes, the overwhelmingly heterosexual society we live in affects our ability to deal with the possibility of being gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender. For Rice, the biggest hurdle in coming out was his own fear about being different. "I came to understand that one of the biggest hang-ups was me. I was convinced everybody would have a horrible reaction to my coming out. But my parents were wonderful — as were many others. Certainly, there was a wide spectrum of reactions — of highly tolerant to not very tolerant. But mostly, I was just projecting onto them my own insecurities."

Early on, in fact, Rice believed he was just going through a "phase." Throughout his teens, he went out with girls, and talked about eventually settling down with a woman. At the same time, he read books — portrayals of gay people leading real lives. And he continued talking with friends and thinking about his same-sex attractions. But when he had his first romantic involvement with a man, everything clicked.

"It really felt right — it felt natural. It felt more complete," recalls Rice. "And most of all, it felt too good to be something that I had to hide."

Understandably, it takes some time for many of us to reach the point where we feel comfortable enough about ourselves to share our discovery with others. But when we do take that step, our lives can change forever — most often, for the better. Before going away to college, Linda

Villarosa was confused and unsure about her sexual orientation. One reason why she did not explore her feelings right away was because, at that time, she was trying to fit into a white neighborhood and didn't want to do anything others could think of as wrong. Finally, after she left for school, she took the step. "I came out because I couldn't stand not being myself any more."

After college, she came out to 7 million readers in an *Essence* article she wrote with her mother. The article, called "Coming Out," remains the most highly responded-to article in the history of the magazine. Villarosa later became executive editor of the magazine and is now a contributing writer to *The New York Times* and is the author of "Body & Soul: The Black Women's Guide to Physical Health and Emotional Well-Being."

Similarly, many transgender and transsexual people come out to be true to themselves. But it still can be quite dangerous for some people to have their transgender status revealed, says writer/activist Jamison Green. "It's necessary for transpeople to be comfortable enough about their difference that they can make appropriate disclosures to others."

What is important is your own comfort level — as well as awareness of your own safety in various circumstances, says Green, a transsexual man. "Not all transpeople need to come out all the time." It's also important to find your own comfort level about how you want to express your gender. "There is no one way to be transgendered," he says. "Some of us just want to alleviate our body/gender misalignment and experience life as 'ordinary' men or women, whether we are gay, straight or bisexual.

"I knew everyone would watch me change from androgynous to masculine, from woman to man, and some people would be disgusted, some frightened and some derisive," he recalls. "I was amazed how much support I received, and I know it was because I was clear and calm and understanding when others were confused. I had to spend a lot of time answering questions; I was very patient with people, and I know that made a difference for them."

And remember, you are never too old to come out. Each of us comes out at the age that feels best — as teens or retirees — or somewhere in between. Support networks and sources of information remain the same for all, although coming out at a later age may pose different challenges. Some people come out in middle age as they become more aware about how quickly their lives are passing, and the desire to find self-acceptance and happiness takes on greater urgency. You may have spent the first part of your life living up to other people's expectations of you. Now is the time to live up to your own expectations of yourself.

### **Coming out to yourself**

"Growing up, I felt there was something about me that truly set me apart from other kids. But I didn't have a grasp on what it was," says Candace Gingrich, manager of HRC's National Coming Out Project and half-sister of former House Speaker Newt Gingrich.

"I had a few fleeting crushes on girls and, then, a full-blown crush. Inside, they felt right and normal. But at the same time, I didn't have any way to process those feelings because I didn't know any gay people or know that I knew them. I felt that I would risk something if I expressed my feelings."

Gingrich started playing on her college rugby team — which had some lesbian players — and for the first time saw women being openly affectionate to each other. "It was like being dropped into what was originally a foreign country but, once there, I realized it was my country of origin. I thought, 'Wow, the feelings I've been having are normal. It is OK to be who I am.'"

Whether or not you attend college, campuses often have LGBT-related organizations or activities for you to participate in.

At the same time, remember that it's not always easy to be out. It may take a few years to feel entirely comfortable, says Tracy Young, a disc jockey and music mixer, who has worked with Enrique Iglesias, Stevie Nicks, Ricky Martin, Anna Sui, Lauryn Hill and Madonna.

Young says it was hard for her during the initial years. "I was almost ashamed at times to be gay — in particular, if I was away from my friends and others who were supportive — and in more of a conservative environment. 'What if these people find out that I'm gay?' I would ask myself," said Young. "It's not always easy. Not everyone will accept you. Sometimes, people will call you names or give you looks when you walk down the street."

It was extremely important for Young to find others who were supportive or who were LGBT or questioning, she said. "Being around other gay people who had similar stories really helped," says Young. "Finding a gay support system was important." She also started reading books about being gay or lesbian when she was a young teen. "I think it's hard when you're struggling with who you are. It can be a scary thing — but, in the end, always be true to yourself."

### **Coming out online**

Thanks to the increased access to computers as well as the ease — and relative privacy — of Internet communications, increasing numbers of people are choosing to come out online. Chat rooms and other features allow Internet users to participate in online communities where they can be themselves — free of fear. Some are finding the environment to be so supportive that they are coming out online, before coming out to parents, coworkers and close friends.

Corey Johnson, a captain of his Massachusetts high school football team who made national headlines when he came out in 1999, used the Internet for support more than a year before telling anyone at home and at school. He regularly visited a website where he could communicate with other gay teens, including athletes like himself, who also were afraid to come out. And he exchanged e-mail messages with another gay football player in Illinois. Being able to hook up with others like him helped Johnson as he struggled with his sexuality, wondering if his family and friends would accept that part of him. The online communications helped him take the next

step — telling a few of his teachers, his parents and his closest friends — and, finally, the other players on his football team.

Nationally known transgender activist Dana Rivers also is enthusiastic about resources available on the Internet. Accurate information about transgender issues is much harder to find than information related to gay, lesbian and bisexual issues. Gay bookstores and LGBT centers in local communities often fail to offer basic resources on such topics, says Rivers who is a transsexual woman. Internet chats can often help someone who is exploring the possibility of transitioning, for example, to gather more information and talk to someone who has gone through the experience.

While online communications can be invaluable, users need to remember to take care. It's important to exercise good judgment in deciding with whom you share information. It's also important to verify and confirm any statistics or medical information with other reliable sources.

### **Coming out to others**

Some people come out when someone asks them if they're gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender. Others make a point of pulling people aside and saying, "There's something I have to tell you."

If you choose the latter option, ask yourself: "Who is the most open-minded and caring person I know who is also the least likely to be shocked, threatened or put off?" This might be a friend, a relative or a teacher. Tell that person you have questions about your sexual orientation or your gender identity, or that you're trying to be more honest and you'd like to talk. Say you've come to them because you trust them.

Corey Johnson, the openly gay high school football captain, first felt comfortable talking to his guidance counselor. Later, he shared the information with a biology teacher, then a lacrosse coach — and after that, his parents. All were supportive and were able to better understand his recent mood swings and falling grades.

Like Johnson, you may want to consider talking to a school counselor, a supportive teacher, a member of a LGBT student group or a therapist. The student groups widely known as gay-straight alliances exist in a number of high schools and colleges — and often include straight students who are supportive of their LGBT and questioning classmates. Some large cities have LGBT community centers. In addition, several national hotlines are available. Look in the back of this guide for those numbers and other resources.

For those who are transgender, it also can be helpful to contact national groups that focus specifically on transgender-related issues, including Gender Education and Advocacy, the Transgender Law and Policy Institute, GenderPAC and the International Foundation for Gender Education. Local chapters of national groups often have knowledgeable, supportive members in cities across the country who are available to talk, Dana Rivers says.

## **Testing the waters**

You can get a sense of how accepting your friends and family are by the things they say, or don't say, when gay- or transgender-related issues come up. You might try to bring it up yourself by talking about such issues in the news, in films, on radio or television shows, or in the debates over equal rights in the workplace.

If the reactions from your friends or members of your family are positive, the chances are that they'll be more accepting of you. But always keep in mind that it's easier for most people to accept LGBT people in the abstract. It's a bit different when it's "my son" or "my daughter" or even "my best friend."

A word of caution: It's always a risk to come out. You never can know how anyone will react — because our society, throughout history, has been full of positive images of heterosexual people and bereft of positive images of LGBT people. There's a good chance that people will judge you based on those images, no matter how open-minded you might think they are. On the other hand, it is often surprising who among your friends and families are the most supportive.

It's a big risk to come out for transgender people, says Dana Rivers, who lost her job as a teacher when she came out. And, more than likely, transgender people cannot conceal who they are from people that knew them before transitioning. "You just cannot hide what you are as a female-to-male or a male-to-female transsexual," says Rivers. It can also be uncomfortable to be transgender in the gay community because some members remain ignorant of gender-related issues and fail to accept transgender people, she notes.

What is key, however, is simply being authentic — when the time is right, Rivers says. "Everyone needs to make their own decision about when to come out. It is important for people, especially those I am close to, to know about this dramatic, profound shift in my life."

## **Telling friends**

When you are ready to come out to your friends, you may be lucky enough to have some friends or acquaintances in the LGBT community to help you — to give you some support, lend you a book that helped them on their journey or simply share a few words of advice. But heterosexual friends also can be staunch supporters. Choose carefully as you reveal this fundamental part of yourself.

For comedian Suzanne Westenhoefer, one of the hardest parts of the entire process was dealing with the reactions of some of her friends. When she came out in college, Westenhoefer and her friends faced a barrage of mean-spirited remarks from other students. "They took an obvious dislike to us. It was hateful, horrible rhetoric — and divisive," she said. In the end, some of Westenhoefer's friends stopped spending time with her. "I lost some friends. I felt like they just couldn't step up to the plate. It was very hard — really hard — to deal with that, and to tell them that they were not being supportive."

Many gay people find that the friends they thought would be least judgmental were the first to drop them, while those who seemed unlikely allies offered the strongest support. But you'll learn

many valuable lessons about what the word "friendship" means. "It's those first five minutes in coming out to your friends or acquaintances that are really the hardest. But after that — things get better than before," says Westenhofer.

Westenhofer feels so strongly about the importance of coming out that after each of her stand-up comedy performances she encourages members of her audiences to take the time to do so with friends, family members — everyone.

"The most important thing you can do is come out. People's hearts have to change — and when a person meets someone who is gay, that more than anything seems to make them understand and take on new attitudes," she says.

And attitudes can and do change — quite extensively. Tracy Young admits that hers did. Young, one of the country's leading disc jockeys and music mixers, recalls recoiling in disgust when two of her closest friends came out to her in high school and told her they were in a relationship. "I just freaked out. I told my mother that two of my friends were together." Her mom proceeded to explain to her, however, that her friends' feelings for each other were OK. "She told me they were my friends — and asked why I was turning my back on them." Young was supportive after that — and eventually met and fell in love with a woman.

### **Telling family members**

Many LGBT people are afraid that their parents will reject them if they come out. You might be afraid that they will throw you out of the house, tell you you're immoral, or simply stop loving you. The good news is that you're probably wrong.

It's true that many parents are shocked when their children say they're gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender. But it is also true that for many parents, it's very hard to completely reject their children. Some parents react in ways that hurt. Some cry. Some get angry. Some ask where they went wrong as a parent. Some call it a sin. Some insist it's a phase. Others try to send their child to counselors or therapists who attempt to change gay people into heterosexuals — a process rejected by all major medical and mental health professional organizations. Some parents send their child to counselors or therapists who try to change gender-variant people.

Candace Gingrich's mother was pretty typical. "She wanted to know what happened to me that turned me into a lesbian," Gingrich recalls. "She wanted to know where she and Dad went wrong. She wanted to know if I hadn't met the right man yet."

Initially, comedian Suzanne Westenhofer's mother also was upset and confused because Westenhofer had been dating boys for several years before she figured out she was gay. "She couldn't understand that I could date guys, like them and yet decide I was a lesbian. And it also went against the old myth that lesbians hate men," she said. It took her mother several months to come to terms with the news. "Then my mother went through a period of being worried about my safety because of 'all the people who don't like queers' — and that I would spend my life in dark bars." She also worried whether she and her daughter would remain close, as they always had been. Within a year or so, however, Westenhofer's mother came to accept her. She was soon including Westenhofer's girlfriend in family activities.

Remember that your parents grew up in a time when some of the misperceptions about LGBT people were more prevalent than they are today. Remember, too, that they're probably trying to keep you safe from something they do not understand. Finally, remember this is big news, and there's really no time schedule for how long it takes parents to adjust. Some take months. Some take years. And, of course, some already know.

Many people have questions when you come out to them. You might want to be prepared by showing them this booklet or another similar resource. Many communities have local chapters of Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays, or PFLAG.

Fortunately, parents seem to be more accepting of their children now than ever, but some parents still go to the extreme. For actor Wilson Cruz, it was awful. His father threw him out.

"I lived in my car for three months," Cruz recalls. For a year, he and his father barely talked. Then one night, *My So-Called Life* aired an episode in which Cruz's character was thrown out of his house for being gay. Cruz's father was watching.

"He called me up after that, and it was very moving. He saw what I went through on an emotional and a physical level, and started to see what he'd done wrong. Now, I wouldn't say it's a complete transformation but he's definitely a lot more accepting of me."

While Cruz's experience was more dramatic than most, it shows that even people who react negatively at first can come around in time — and sometimes become your strongest supporters. It may not be easy for you to give them this time. But don't be discouraged. In the long run, nothing helps as much as patience.

"My biggest fear was that my parents would abandon me if I was honest with them," recalls author Linda Villarosa. "But my mother asked me point-blank: 'Are you a lesbian?' I wasn't comfortable lying. I was also caught off guard. I was so happy. For one split second, I thought, 'They'll be happy for me.'"

Instead, her father cried because he was afraid she didn't love him any more. And her mother demanded that she go to therapy. "She said, 'This isn't really who you are. This is a phase. You can change. You can go to therapy.' But I said, 'No, this is who I am, and I'm happy.'"

While it took time, Villarosa says her family finally let go of the fantasy of the person they thought she was and came to accept the real Linda Villarosa. She and her mother enjoy a close relationship, and Villarosa's mother is helping Linda raise her two children.

### **Coming out to your children**

Children always want to know the truth about their parents' sexual orientation and may already know before being told, says Felicia Park-Rogers, director of Children of Lesbian and Gays Everywhere and an expert on HRC FamilyNet, the organization's web hub for LGBT families. But children are not always happy about the news. It's a tremendous change to have a parent

come out — particularly if it accompanies a divorce. Emotions such as anger, sadness and confusion may emerge. Most of all, children have lots of questions.

You (and, potentially, your partner) need to make a judgment about whether and when to tell your children. Here are some helpful hints:

- Tell your children in a private space where the conversation will be entirely confidential.
- Allow for plenty of time to continue the conversation over the next few days and weeks — and years.
- Explain your sexuality or gender shift in an age-appropriate way.
- Reassure your children that you love them and that they are your top priority.
- Connect them with other children of LGBT parents. Let them know that they are part of a caring community.

### **A lifelong journey**

Coming out to yourself, your friends and families is a huge part of the journey toward being honest about your sexual orientation. But coming out is more than just telling those close to you. It is a challenging process that continues throughout your life and across all of its facets, as the following sections indicate. Many opportunities will arise where you will need to choose whether to come out as a gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender person — whether it's on the job, at a church picnic, while having a conversation on the bus or when filling out a form in your doctor's office. Almost daily, you will face having to make decisions about when and where to come out. But remember, take as much time as you need — this is your journey. And be sure to find help via local support groups or online contacts. If you are transgender, this kind of support is critical because of the particular challenges you face.

### **Coming out in the workplace**

One of the biggest risks you may face is coming out on the job. It's a decision that has the potential to affect your livelihood because there is no federal law that protects you from being fired merely because you're gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender. Some employers have policies against such discrimination - but most do not. It's important to know the law in your state or city, and know your employer's policy before coming out at work.

It's not always easy to come out on the job — even if you've already come out to your family and friends. When Linda Villarosa went to work at *Essence* magazine, she was afraid to come out to her boss and colleagues — even though she had come out in college a few years earlier. But, once again, she found she couldn't stand hiding any more, and she took the chance. "My boss and I were in her car coming back from a weekend editorial retreat, and she was saying something about fixing me up with her brother-in-law. And I just blurted out, 'I'm a lesbian.' She was embarrassed about the brother-in-law and very kind. And that Monday, I came out to just about everybody else at work, and everyone was fine."

While some workplaces can be supportive, it's important to remember that, currently, only 17 states and the District of Columbia have laws protecting you from discrimination based on sexual orientation, and 86 cities, nine counties and two states have laws protecting you from discrimination based on gender identity.

At the federal level, the Human Rights Campaign is working with Congress to pass a measure called the Employment Non-Discrimination Act. ENDA would prohibit discrimination based on sexual orientation. For now, however, use your best judgment when coming out at work. If you feel comfortable enough, you can be an advocate for your workplace to change its non-discrimination policy to include sexual orientation and gender identity. For more information, visit HRC WorkNet - a national source of information on workplace policies and laws surrounding sexual orientation and gender identity — at [www.hrc.org/worknet](http://www.hrc.org/worknet).

Tammy Baldwin, an openly lesbian U.S. congresswoman from Wisconsin, vividly remembers her fears. "As I came out, most troubling was the thought that in order to live my life and my dreams, I'd have to make a choice ... a choice between pursuing a career in public service, perhaps running for office, and living my life in an open and honest way," says Baldwin.

"Many of us feel we face this choice. At the age of 24, I decided I did not have to make that choice, that I could do both," she recalls. "I could run for office and I could be out. It was a terrifying thought. And it ended up being one of the most freeing things I have ever done."

Remember, that if you press for your rights in the workplace, some supervisors and colleagues may become defensive. That's probably because they are unfamiliar with LGBT-related issues and, like most people, fear the unknown. Ensuring that your conduct is professional and relaxed can go a long way toward reducing fear.

If you are transgender, you may want to discuss your personal situation with a trusted manager, supervisor or human resources professional before coming out to coworkers, says Jamison Green, an activist and transsexual man. "It's also key to maintain your work performance while you are focusing on a transition — although it can be quite hard for some since often they are dealing with considerable stress in their relationships with lovers, friends or family."

### **Coming out in the military**

If you are a member of the U.S. military, you can lose your job if you come out. If you want to stay in the military, remember that anything you say can be used against you. If you do want to leave, saying the wrong thing may ruin your discharge or result in a court-martial. Some commands have acted professionally and tried to protect service members' privacy. Others, however, have allowed or condoned gossip and harassment against service members who have come out.

You may see coming out as a matter of honesty. Others who are gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender may feel differently. They may come out and seek discharge as a means of escaping anti-gay threats and harassment — or because they find they are unable to serve in a homophobic military. Whatever your reasons, it's in your best interest to get professional advice before acting. Contact the Service members Legal Defense Network on the web at [www.sldn.org](http://www.sldn.org).

### **Coming out to your healthcare provider**

Being honest about your sexual orientation or gender identity can be a matter of life and death —

or, at a minimum, essential to getting effective care and treatment. Some of the people who may most need to know the truth about your orientation or identity are your health care providers. Coming out to them can be hard, however, because inaccurate information exists across the medical community about the treatment of LGBT patients.

A number of health care providers still mistakenly presume all patients are heterosexual. As a result, it can be awkward when a doctor or nurse asks whether you are sexually active and what kind of birth control you use. Their ignorance encourages many LGBT people to delay or avoid getting the care they need. And it keeps many from talking with their providers about promoting good health and preventing disease in an informed, open way.

Transgender and transsexual people also need to be aware that many U.S. insurance companies exclude health care coverage to people who are undergoing medical sex reassignment. Disclosure about your transgender status may be risky if it becomes part of your medical record. Moreover, supportive health care providers face obstacles in giving care and treatment to transgender and transsexual people — who often have to pay for services routinely covered by insurance companies.

If you are not ready to come out to your own health care provider, perhaps you would feel more comfortable talking with a gay-friendly one. Your local LGBT community center may be able to help you. In addition, feel free to contact LGBT health organizations that are willing to educate physicians and protect your anonymity at the same time.

Similarly, if you have a therapist, make sure he or she is knowledgeable about issues facing LGBT people. A number of providers remain ill-informed, particularly about transgender issues — and could give inaccurate or damaging advice. Many professionals, when working on such issues, use a set of guidelines compiled by the World Professional Association for Transgender Health, Inc. A growing number of doctors, however, treat transgender clients by getting their informed consent.

It's important for you to ask your doctor if she or he has experienced working with a transgender patient's transition — and whether it has been from male to female or female to male. It's also a good idea to consult transgender organizations or friends before choosing a doctor or therapist. In addition, it's important to understand that there is no right or wrong way to transition. It's your own process. Whether you choose to take hormones or to have sex reassignment surgery, it's OK. Do whatever is comfortable to allow you to be true to yourself.

### **Spirituality and coming out**

Many people find strength and support from their faith as they struggle to come out as gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender. At first, this might sound like a contradiction since many organized religions teach that homosexuality and gender variance are wrong or immoral. But there are also a growing number of organized religions changing their positions on homosexuality, including the country's largest Jewish group — the Central Conference of American Rabbis — which took the lead in sanctioning gay unions during its annual meeting in March 2000. The 3.6 million-member Presbyterian Church U.S.A. defeated a proposal that same

month to bar clergy from officiating at same-sex marriage ceremonies. Regardless of what religion you are, most religions also teach that God is merciful.

Former youth activist Jamie Nabozny was raised Pentecostal and hoped to become a minister. But he was gay and thought the only worse thing he could be was Satan himself. So he tried to put his same-sex attractions aside until, one day, he could deny them no longer.

"I walked as far as I could into a big field. I was crying, praying and hollering at God. I said, 'I've read the Bible, I've prayed, I go to church three times a week. Every time I have a homosexual thought, I rebuke it in the name of God and yet still I'm gay. Either you're not there, or you don't give a damn that I'm gay.' It took me a little while but then I realized God was OK with it. The God I really believed in was not a God that hated or condemned people."

This is an experience many people go through. Faced with a conflict between their religion and their feelings, they come to realize that the God they truly believe in could never condemn people for loving. Some people find their spirituality even helps them come out.

Comedian Suzanne Westenhoefer says she and her sister, a born-again Christian, have made progress over the last 10 years or so — despite her sister's discomfort about Westenhoefer's being openly gay. It has taken time, however, she says. "We're adults now and we try to find common ground in other places in our lives. We're trying to move forward." But Westenhoefer notes she always insists that her sister, no matter what her beliefs, treat her with full respect.

Members of all faiths and denominations are increasingly reaching out to the LGBT community. As they come out, many find it helpful to contact and get involved with a supportive group in their local area.

Credits

From Human Rights Campaign ([www.hrc.org](http://www.hrc.org)) and Human Rights Campaign Resource Guide to Coming Out;  
and from the UCLA LGBT Campus Resource Center ([www.lgbt.ucla.edu/](http://www.lgbt.ucla.edu/))