

## COMING OUT

- Many people have realised that hiding their sexual orientation can indeed cause great stress, anxiety, pressure or struggling to find your sense of self/identity.
- However, “coming out” does not mean telling everybody you meet that you are gay, lesbian, bisexual or however you identify. In essence “coming out” is a process that allows a person to be in touch with his/her sexuality and to express themselves accordingly.
- When people have discussed how they came out, many use the imagery of a great burden being lifted from them. But this may not happen initially, as coming out can be a stressful and difficult process, especially when family and friends react negatively, but in time people have said that they are happier after they come out.
- In many countries around the world coming out is also a political act. Gay, lesbians and bisexuals who have come out have decided that it is time to stand up and be counted, to be identified as part of a community and to familiarise the broader populations with homosexuality.

The Development of Sexual Orientation People with predominately same sex orientation show similar stages of identity development - with individual variations of course. The following model or framework may provide a useful way of understanding this development.

Not every individual follows each stage. It is also common for some people to work on the developmental tasks related to several different stages simultaneously.

**Stage 1 Pre-Coming Out** Many people may be uncertain about their sexual identity. Time may be needed to explore this. It is possible that at a conscious or pre-conscious level the child and family members know that even then the child’s sexual orientation ‘differs’. Often the young person feels alienated and ‘different’.

Fear of rejection and ridicule create a barrier to the open acknowledgement of homosexual feelings. As a consequence, the person resolves the conflict through the use of certain defence mechanisms such as denial, repression or sublimation. (Sublimation is the channelling of conflictual feelings into socially acceptable behaviour). The attempts to deny or repress feelings may lead to behavioural problems, psychosomatic illness, depression, low self-esteem and even suicide. Others may sublimate their feelings and become intensely absorbed in some socially valued activity such as school work, religion, music or art - where being alone is not regarded as being strange.

Facing your true identity and fears of being ‘different’ is a healthy approach to adopt. This is the process of “coming out”. It can begin at any age depending on a number of factors including family, personality and friends.

**Stage 2 Coming Out** The first step in “coming out” is being true to yourself- acknowledging what you feel and who you are. This first step in identifying yourself as gay, lesbian or bisexual can take many years to complete. Self-identifying is a way of starting the “coming out” process. In a way you cannot fully tell other people you are gay, lesbian or bisexual until you have told yourself.

At the same time, sharing this fact with someone else can function as the beginning of self-acceptance.

One technique to help in this process is to look at yourself in the mirror, see yourself for who you are, accept yourself looking back for who you are and say “I am gay”, “I am lesbian” or “I am bisexual”. Say it slowly over and over again.

Another exercise is to find a quiet place to go for a walk. Bring a piece of paper and a pen. Write at the top of the sheet of paper “I am gay” or “I am lesbian” or “I am bisexual”. Now, write down all your feelings around this whether they are positive or negative. Keep this for the purpose of reflection- for times of confusion, anger, stress. Remind yourself that these feelings are OK. It is a completely normal reaction for friends/family to be surprised and for them to need time to digest the news. This does not mean that they have taken the news negatively but they may not have had the time you have to sit with this news.

Encourage them to research or ask questions- this will help the understanding process.

**Stage 3 Exploration / Experimentation** This is a period of exploring and experimenting with a new sexual identity. There are several developmental tasks involved.

The first is the development of interpersonal skills in order to socialise with others with a similar sexual orientation. Having being socialised as heterosexual, homosexual individuals may lack these skills.

Secondly, there is a need for some to develop a sense of personal attractiveness and sexual competence.

Thirdly, for some there is a need to recognise that self-esteem is not based upon sexual conquest.

#### **Stage 4 Initial Relationships**

The main task of this stage is to learn how to function in a homosexual relationship. The yearning for a more stable, committed relationship can be sabotaged by lingering negative attitudes about homosexuality. It is nice to remember that the person you are in a relationship with may not have had the same ‘coming out’ experience as you. It may have been challenging for them.

Respect, support and honesty are key factors in any relationship. It is important to be mindful of yourself and the other person when going forward in a relationship.

**Stage 5 Integration** This is an ongoing process of development where new feelings about yourself continue to emerge. Reintegration and self-definition takes place. Public and private identities are incorporated into a coherent self-image. Relationships at this point can be more successful.