

SELF HELP SHEET

Student Counselling Service

Coming Out

What is meant by Coming Out?

Coming out is a process through which people come to identify themselves as gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgendered (GLBT). Heterosexual people also have a process of becoming sexually aware and active, but do not have to 'come out' because our society assumes everyone is heterosexual. Coming out involves recognition and acknowledgement of one's sexuality (coming out to oneself) and then a series of disclosures to the important people in one's life (coming out to others). The process of coming out is a very individual one and varies in length for different people. It can be stressful and difficult, but most people feel relief, or as if a weight has been lifted off their shoulders, after they have come out.

Why should I come out?

No one has the right to tell that you 'should' come out to others. You always have the right to decide to whom and when you come out. However, the stress of having to hide your sexuality from others can be very wearing and stressful. Your own safety and self-esteem must always be considered when making this decision as some people still remain misinformed, afraid, and intolerant about people who are GLBT. The benefits of coming out include being able to be more yourself with people, being able to meet more people who are also GLBT, and a growing sense of pride in yourself as gay/lesbian/bisexual/transgendered.

What should I think about before coming out?

There are a number of things you might want to consider. Remember that it took time for you to adjust to your sexuality and it is likely to take others a while as well. It is a good idea to expect a wide range of reactions from people. The people you tell might be shocked, upset, act differently for a while, or try to tell you that you are wrong about your sexuality. They may even come out to you! It can be helpful to come out to people you know to be open minded about sexuality and gender first and then when you have more confidence, people who are likely to have a harder time hearing what you say. It is a good idea to have support for yourself lined up in the event that someone's reaction disappoints or even distresses you. Information on supports available to you, your family and friends can be found at the bottom of this sheet.

Family members are often the most important people in our lives and can be the hardest people to come out to. More than your friends, family members can have expectations and hopes for you that they feel are jeopardised by your living a GLBT lifestyle. They may also have fears about what your sexuality is going to mean for them. Your family may want you to talk to a counsellor or another trusted person. Try to understand their motivation and listen to their fears. It may actually be helpful for you or you and your family together to see a counsellor or seek other support. Honest communication along with taking care of yourself emotionally are important parts of coming out.

Here are some helpful tips for the coming out process:

1. Take your time. Do not feel that you have to rush this process because that can create a higher level of stress.
2. If you are confused about your sexuality, or just want someone to talk to, do not be afraid to seek support. The Student Counselling Service is a good place to get support and information (as are the other resources listed below).
3. Be thoughtful about who you come out to and be prepared for some disappointing reactions. Remember that people's reactions are statements about them and their beliefs, not about you.
4. Make sure that you get the support you need. Coming out is liberating but can be a stressful experience. You need not go through it alone. There are many people who have been there and others who are waiting to support you. Some are listed below.

Resources

OUThouse is Dublin's GLBT community resource centre. They offer a wealth of support services in a relaxed and friendly atmosphere. You can visit their webpage at www.OUTHouse.ie or phone them at 01 873 4932. OUThouse hosts First Out, an informal meeting for lesbians coming out. To get information about when First Out meets, phone the Lesbian Line at 01 872 9911.

Gay Switchboard offers "non-judgemental, confidential, information and support". You can visit their website at www.gayswitchboard.ie or phone them at 01 872 1055. Among the many services they offer is Ice Breakers, a regular informal meeting for people who are coming out. Gay Switchboard also hosts Parents Support (for parents of a GLBT child/young person). You or your parents can visit the website at www.gayswitchboard.ie/parents.html or phone the Gay Switchboard to be put in touch with a member of Parents Support. Gay Switchboard and Parents Support have published a booklet, "If your child is lesbian or gay", that can be very helpful. It is available on-line or can be ordered from Gay Switchboard.

An Irish monthly "Gay Community Newspaper" is published electronically on www.gcn.ie You might be surprised at the number and variety of supports and events there are.
