

Resource Guide to Coming Out



(Adapted from *A Resource Guide to Coming Out*, the Human Rights Campaign Coming Out Project, Rhode Island, U.S.A. Retrieved from <http://www.hrc.org/resources/entry/resource-guide-to-coming-out> ,October, 2014)

Being brave doesn't mean that you're not scared. It means that if you are scared, you do the thing you're afraid of anyway.

Coming out and living openly as a lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, questioning, two-spirited or supportive straight person is an act of bravery and authenticity.

Whether it's for the first time ever, or for the first time today, coming out may be the most important thing you will do all day.

Talk about it.

<p style="text-align: center;">Table of Contents</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Welcome</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Being Open with Yourself</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Deciding to Tell Others</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Making a Coming Out Plan</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Having the Conversations</p> <p style="text-align: center;">The Coming Out Continuum</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Telling Family Members</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Living Openly on Your Terms</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Glossary</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Resources</p>

WELCOME!

There is no one right or wrong way to come out. It's a lifelong process of being ever more open and true with yourself and others — done in your own way and in your own time.

Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, questioning, and two-spirited Canadians are sons and daughters, doctors, lawyers, students, politicians, teachers and construction workers.

In all that diversity, we have one thing in common: We each make deeply personal decisions to be open about who we are with ourselves and others — even when it isn't easy.

We express that openness by telling our friends, family, co-workers and even strangers that — among all the other things we are — we're also lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, questioning, or two-spirited.

In so doing, we meet a challenge that was handed to each of us at birth: to be honest about this aspect of our lives, even when it's hard, and to talk with the people we care about, even when we don't know all the words.

Each of us meets this challenge in our own way and in our own time. Throughout the process of coming out and living ever more openly, you should always be in the driver's seat about how, where, when and with whom you choose to be open.

This guide was designed to help you through that process in realistic and practical terms. It acknowledges that the experience of coming out and living openly covers the full spectrum of human emotion — from fear to euphoria.

The Human Rights Campaign and its Coming Out Project hope this guide helps you meet the challenges and opportunities that living openly offers to each of us.

A Special Note:

No resource can be fully applicable to every member of the LGBTTIQQ2S communities. Therefore, the HRC Coming Out Project offers other resources beyond this general guide, including materials specifically designed for transgender people, African-Americans, Latinos/as and more. Visit www.hrc.org/comingout for additional information.

BEING OPEN WITH YOURSELF

From birth, most of us are raised to think of ourselves as fitting into a certain mold. Our culture and our families teach us that we are “supposed” to be attracted to people of the opposite sex, and that boys and girls are supposed to look, act and feel certain ways.

Few of us were told we might fall in love with someone of the same sex, or that we might have a gender identity that differs from the body into which we were born. That's why so many of us are scared, worried or confused when facing these truths.



“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 because there's nothing standing in between you anymore.”

Opening up to the possibility that you may be lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, questioning, or two-spirited means opening up to the idea that you're on a path that's your own. It's also why coming out and living ever more openly is a profoundly liberating experience.

In the end, just as at the beginning, the first person you have to be open with is yourself.

Throughout the coming out process, it's normal to feel:

Scared	Relieved	Empowered	Confused	Vulnerable
Exhilarated	Brave	Uncertain	Proud	Affirmed

DECIDING TO TELL OTHERS

Most people come out because, sooner or later, they can't stand hiding who they are anymore.

They want their relationships to be stronger, richer, more fulfilling and more authentic.

Once we do come out, most of us find that it feels far better to be open and honest than to conceal such an integral part of ourselves.

We also come to recognize that our personal decision to live openly helps break down barriers and stereotypes that have kept others in the closet. And in doing so, we make it easier for others to follow our example.

The Benefits of Coming Out:

- Living an open and whole life.
- Developing closer, more genuine relationships.
- Building self-esteem from being known and loved for who we really are.
- Reducing the stress of hiding our identity.
- Connecting with others who are LGBTTIQQ2S.
- Being part of a strong and vibrant community.
- Helping to dispel myths and stereotypes about who LGBTTIQQ2S people are and what our lives are like.
- Becoming a role model for others.
- Making it easier for younger LGBTTIQQ2S people who will follow in our footsteps.



“Certainly, there was a wide spectrum of reactions — from warmly accepting to cold and judgmental. But mostly, I was just projecting my own insecurities onto others.”

Along with these benefits, there are also risks. As constructive as the decision is, the reaction of others can be difficult, maybe even impossible, to predict.



“Admitting to myself that I was gay took a long time. Once I was past that step, I realized that not everyone would accept me. But it’s not about them. It’s about me, living my life as the person I really am.”

The Risks of Coming Out:

- Not everyone will be understanding or accepting.
- Family, friends or co-workers may be shocked, confused or even hostile.
- Some relationships may permanently change.
- You may experience harassment or discrimination.
- Your physical safety may be at risk.
- Some young people, especially those under age 18, may be thrown out of their homes or lose financial support from their parents.

You’re in Charge:

When you weigh the benefits and risks of being open about who you are, it’s important to remember that the person in charge of your coming out journey is you. You decide who to confide in, when to do it and how. You also decide when coming out just may not be right, necessary or advisable.

And, Keep in Mind:

There is no one right or wrong way to come out or live openly. Choosing to come out or to be open does not mean you have to be out at all times or in all places — you decide how, where and when, based on what’s right for you. Your sexual orientation and gender identity are important pieces of you, but they do not have to define you. Living openly doesn’t change all the many unique things that make you, you.

MAKING A COMING OUT PLAN

When you're ready to tell that first person — or those first few people — give yourself time to prepare. Think through your options and make a deliberate plan of who to approach, when and how. You may want to ask yourself the following questions:

What kind of signals are you getting?

- You can get a sense of how accepting people will be by the things they say — or don't say — when LGBTTIQQ2S-related issues come up. Try to bring them up yourself by talking about an LGBTTIQQ2S-themed movie, TV character or news event. If a person's reactions are positive, chances are he or she will be more accepting of what you have to tell them.

Are you well informed about LGBTTIQQ2S issues?

- The reactions of others will most likely be based on misinformation, and in some cases, even negative portrayals of LGBTTIQQ2S people. If you've done some reading on the subject, you'll be prepared to answer their concerns and questions with reliable and accurate information. Helpful facts and frequently asked questions can be found later in this guide, and more information is available at www.hrc.org.

Do you know what it is you want to say?

- Particularly at the beginning of the coming out process, many people are still answering tough questions for themselves and are not ready to identify as being lesbian, gay, bisexual, transsexual, transgender, queer, questioning or two-spirited. That's OK. Maybe you just want to tell someone that you're attracted to a person of the same sex, or that you feel your true gender does not align with cultural gender norms.

Labels aren't important; your feelings are. You may also want to try writing out what you want to say, to help organize and express your thoughts clearly.

Do you have support?

- You don't have to do this alone. A support system is an invaluable place to turn for reassurance. Sources of support can be other LGBTTIQQ2S people who are living openly, LGBTTIQQ2S hot lines, school counsellors, a supportive member of the clergy or, if you are coming out for the second or third time, perhaps the person you opened up to initially. A supportive mental health professional often helps people become more comfortable. In fact, these are the first people some of us come out to.



"Everyone needs to make their own decision about when to come out. For me, it's important that people I'm close to know about this important piece of me."

Is this a good time?

- Timing can be important. Be aware of the mood, priorities, stresses and problems of those to whom you would like to come out. Be aware of major life concerns that may make it difficult for them to respond constructively to yours.

Can you be patient?

- Some people will need time to deal with this new information, just as it took time for many of us to come to terms with being LGBTTIQQ2S. When you come out to others, be prepared to give them the time they need to adjust to what you've said. Rather than expect immediate understanding, try to establish an ongoing, caring dialogue.

- Remember, the whole reason you chose to be open with the person is because you care about them. If they react strongly, it's likely because they care about you as well. Keep that in mind as you navigate trying times.

HAVING THE CONVERSATIONS

Fostering strong, deep relationships with your friends and family begins with honesty. Living openly is important because it allows for closer relationships with the people you care about — and ultimately a happier life for you. For most people, coming out or opening up to someone new starts with a conversation.

It's normal to want or hope for positive reactions from the people you tell, including:

- Acceptance
- Support
- Understanding
- Comfort
- Reassurance that your relationship won't be negatively affected
- Confidence that your relationship will be closer
- Acknowledgment of your feelings
- Love

All or some of these positive reactions can result from your coming out conversation, but they may not happen immediately. Putting yourself in the other person's shoes may also be helpful.

A person who has just had someone come out to them often feels:

- Surprised
- Honoured
- Uncomfortable

- Scared
- Unsure how to react
- Supportive
 - Disbelieving
- Relieved
- Curious
- Angry
- Anxious
- Unsure what to do next

Give the person you're telling the time they need. It may also be helpful to remember that the person you're really doing this for is you. When you're ready to tell someone, consider starting with the person most likely to be supportive. This might be a friend, relative or teacher. Maybe you will tell this person that you are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transsexual, transgender, queer, questioning or two-spirited. Maybe you will simply say that you have questions about your sexual orientation or gender identity.

Again, there is no right or wrong way to do this. You are the expert in knowing what's best for yourself and what you are feeling. When you are ready, here are a couple of things to keep in mind:

- Find a relaxed, private place to have the conversation, and allow adequate time.
- People will usually take their cues from you on how to approach this — so be open and honest and tell them that it's OK to ask questions.

Appropriate and gentle humour can go a long way toward easing anxiety for both you and the person you are speaking with.

Telling Friends

When you're ready to come out to friends, you may be lucky enough to have some who are already out themselves, or who have an LGBTTIQQ2S friend or relative of their own. Often, however, coming out to a friend can be a leap of faith. Here are some things you may want to consider:

- Your friends may surprise you. Those you thought would be least judgemental may be the first to turn away; those who seem least likely to be accepting sometimes offer the strongest support.
- Don't assume prejudice. Earlier, we mentioned that signals can help indicate someone's level of support — or lack thereof. While that's true, it is just as possible to read too much into an off-the-cuff remark. Give your friends a chance to be supportive.
- Provide resources. The HRC Coming Out Project has resources for straight friends and family members to help them understand and learn more.

THE COMING OUT CONTINUUM

Coming out and living openly isn't something you do once, or even for one year. It's a journey that we make every single day of our lives.

There are three broad stages that people move through on the coming out continuum. For each person it is a little different, and you may find that at times you move backward and forward through all of the phases at the same time.

Opening Up to Yourself:

The period when your journey is beginning — when you're asking yourself questions, moving toward coming out to yourself and perhaps making the decision to tell others.

The list goes on from there. For example, every time you go on vacation with a partner, you may be asked if you and your "friend" would like separate beds. You will then have a choice to make about whether or not you choose that moment to explain that this person is not your friend, but rather your partner or spouse.

Coming Out:

The period when you're actively talking for the first time about your sexual orientation or gender identity with family, friends, co-workers, classmates and other people in your life.

Living Openly:

The ongoing phase after you've initially talked with the people closest to you about your life as an LGBTTIQQ2S person, and are now able to tell new people that come into your life fluidly — where and when it feels appropriate to you.

Whether it's proclaimed by a Human Rights Campaign sticker, a rainbow flag or a picture of a partner on your desk, there are a variety of ways that people incorporate coming out into everyday life so they can live openly in a way that feels natural and comfortable.

TELLING FAMILY MEMBERS

No matter what their age, many people are afraid their parents will reject them if they come out. The good news is that you're probably wrong. If, however, you are under age 18 or financially dependent on your parents, consider your decision very, very carefully.

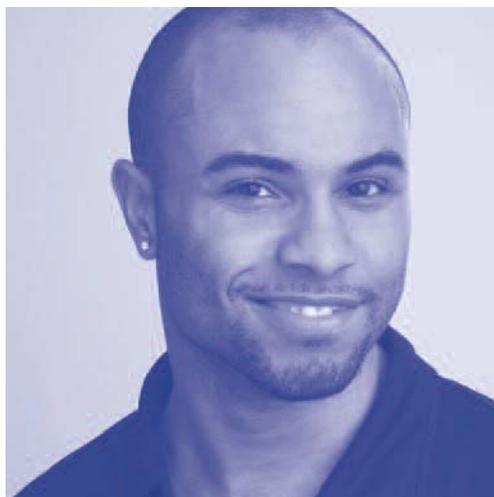
Some reactions you may want to prepare for:

- Some parents may react in ways that hurt. They may cry, get angry or feel embarrassed.
- Some parents will feel honoured and appreciate that you have entrusted them with an important piece of truth about yourself.
- Some parents will need to grieve the dreams they had for you, before they see the new, more genuine life you are building for yourself.

- They may ask where they “went wrong” or if they did something “to cause this.” Assure them that they did nothing wrong.
- Some may call being LGBTTIQQ2S a sin, or attempt to send their child to a counsellor or therapist in the baseless hope that they can “change.”
- Some parents will already know you’re lesbian, gay, bisexual, transsexual, transgender, queer, questioning or two-spirited — or they might have inkling. They may have been waiting for you to tell them and find your doing so a relief.
- It may take time for a parent to absorb or come to terms with the information. Good or bad, their initial reaction may not reflect their feelings over the long-term.

Remember that your parents grew up in a time when some of the stereotypes about LGBTTIQQ2S 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, keep in mind this is big news, and there’s no timetable for how long it takes parents to adjust.



“The most important thing you can do is come out. People’s hearts have to change— and meeting someone who is gay can make a person understand and take on new attitudes.”

LIVING OPENLY ON YOUR TERMS

As you continue to live openly, here are some other points to consider:

- It’s important to remember that the journey from “Coming Out” to “Living Openly” is ongoing and unfolds at your own pace.
- Living openly is something that becomes easier with time. Even after you’ve been open for years, it will often take a little energy when you tell someone new — but it gets exponentially easier with each person you tell.
- Living openly as a lesbian, gay, bisexual, transsexual, transgender, queer, questioning, two-spirited or supportive straight person can help to make it easier for young LGBTTIQQ2S people who will follow this generation.

- Living openly can be a passive expression of who you are — such as displaying a rainbow or equality sticker or a loved one's photograph — or it can be a deliberate process involving a planned conversation or the decision to always be ready to affirm your sexual orientation or gender identity should a situation arise.
- Living openly doesn't mean that the sole or even primary, aspect of your identity is being LGBTTIQQ2S. It means making this part of your life a natural piece of you — just like your age, height, hair colour or personality.
- Living openly lets other people know, especially those who are judgemental or biased, that their attitudes are theirs alone.
- On a daily basis, you will face decisions about where, when and how to come out — or where, when and why not to. Always remember, this is your journey. You get to decide how to take it.

GLOSSARY OF TERMS

Many people refrain from talking about sexual orientation and gender identity and expression because it feels taboo, or because they're afraid of saying the wrong thing. This glossary was written to help give people the words and meanings to help make conversations easier and more comfortable.

Bisexual – A person emotionally, romantically, sexually and relationally attracted to both men and women, though not necessarily simultaneously. A bisexual person may not be equally attracted to both sexes, and the degree of attraction may vary as sexual identity develops over time.

Coming out – A lifelong self-acceptance process. LGBTTIQQ2S people identify this identity first to themselves, and then may reveal it to others. Publicly identifying one's identity may or may not be part of the coming out process.

Gay – A word describing a man or a woman who is emotionally, romantically, sexually and relationally attracted to members of the same sex.

Gender expression – External manifestation of one's gender identity, usually expressed through masculine, feminine or gender-variant behaviour, clothing, haircut, voice or body characteristics. Typically, transgender people seek to make their gender expression match their gender identity, rather than their birth-assigned sex.

Gender Identity – One's personal sense of their gender. For transgender people, their birth-assigned sex and their own sense of gender identity do not match.

Genderqueer – A word people use to describe their own non- standard gender identity, or by those who do not conform to traditional gender norms.

Homophobia – The fear and hatred of or discomfort with, people who love and are sexually attracted to members of the same sex.

Internalized homophobia – Self-identification of societal stereotypes by an LGBTTIQQ2S person, causing them to dislike and resent their sexual orientation or gender identity.

Lesbian – A woman who is emotionally, romantically, sexually and relationally attracted to other women.

LGBTTIQQ2S – An acronym for “lesbian, gay, bisexual transsexual, transgender, queer, questioning, two-spirited.”

Living openly – A state in which LGBTTIQQ2S people are out about their sexual orientation or gender identity in their personal, public and/or professional lives.

Outing – The act of publicly declaring someone's sexual orientation or gender identity, sometimes based on rumour or speculation, without that person's consent.

Queer – Traditionally considered a derogatory term, it has been adopted by many LGBTTIQQ2S people (especially young people) to describe themselves.

Sexual orientation – An enduring emotional, romantic, sexual and relational attraction to another person; may be a same-sex, opposite-sex or a bisexual orientation.

Sexual preference – A term considered offensive by many LGBTTIQQ2S people. It suggests that being LGBTTIQQ2S is a voluntary decision that can be “cured.”

Straight supporter (a.k.a., ally)– A person who supports and honors sexual diversity, acts accordingly to challenge homophobic remarks and behaviors, and explores and understands these forms of bias within him- or herself.

Transgender – An umbrella term describing a broad range of people who experience and/or express their gender differently from what most people expect. It includes people who describe themselves as transsexual, cross-dressers or otherwise gender nonconforming.

Transphobia – The fear and hatred of, or discomfort with, people whose gender identity or gender expression do not conform to cultural gender norms.

Transsexual – An older medical term used to describe people whose gender identity and birth-assigned sex do not match. Many people prefer the term “transgender” to describe themselves.

Two-spirited - Two-spirited is a First Nations term for individuals who are considered to be neither women nor men. It often implies a masculine spirit and a feminine spirit living in the same body. Traditionally, two-spirited individuals were seen as having a gift and they performed traditional duties of both genders.

The Human Rights Campaign would like to thank the Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (www.glaad.org) for providing definitions for many of these terms.

RESOURCES

Humber Counselling Services –

North

Room B112

416-675-5090

counselling@humber.ca

Monday -Friday 8:30 a.m.- 4:30 p.m.

*Wednesdays open late - 6:30pm (Last appt at 5:15pm)

Lakeshore

Room A120

416-675-6622 ext. 3331

counselling@humber.ca

Monday -Friday 8:30 a.m.- 4:30 p.m.

*Wednesdays open late - 6:30pm (Last appt at 5:15pm)

Orangeville

Room O208

416-675-6622 ext. 5912

counselling@humber.ca

Mondays only - 8:30 a.m.- 4:30 p.m

David Kelley Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, Queer (LGBTQ) Counselling Program

– Family Service Toronto

For further information or to arrange an appointment call 416-595-9618 between 9:00 a.m.- 6:00 p.m.

Monday to Thursday and 9:00 a.m.- 5:00 p.m. on Fridays.

Lesbian, Gay, Bi, Trans Youthline

Peer Support Service Lines (Serving All of Ontario):

Toll-Free: 1-800-268-9688

In the Greater Toronto Area: 416-962-9688

Text Messaging: 647-694-4275

E-mail: askus@youthline.ca

Open Sunday to Friday (Closed on Saturday & major holidays) 4:00pm to 9:30pm

Confidential, free & non-judgmental peer support

PFLAG (Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays)

<http://www.pflagcanada.ca/>

Produced by Humber College Gender and Sexual Diversity Committee <http://humber.ca/lgbtq/>

