

- Be prepared for an initially negative reaction from some people. Do not forget that it took time for you to come to terms with your own sexuality and it is important to give others the time they need.
- Have friends lined up to talk with about what happens.

Don't give up hope if you don't initially get the reaction you wanted. Some people need more time than others to come to terms with what they have heard.

Above all, be careful not to let your self-esteem depend entirely on the approval of others. If a person rejects you and refuses even to try to work on acceptance, that's not your fault. In such a case, you may want to re-evaluate the nature of the relationship and its importance to you, but in no case is such rejection evidence of your lack of worth or value.

### Summary

The decision to come out is always personal. Whether to come out and, if so, when, where, how, and to whom are all questions you must answer for yourself. Taking control of this process includes being aware in advance of potential ramifications so that you can act positively rather than defensively. Coming out may be one of the most difficult tasks lesbians and gay men confront in their lives, but it can also be one of the most rewarding. Coming out is one way of affirming your dignity and the dignity of other lesbians and gay men.

### Some excellent books on this topic are:

*Positively Gay.* Betty Berzun & Robert Leighton, Editors. Millbrae, CA: Celestial Arts, 1979.

*Our Right to Love.* Ginny Vida, Editor. Prentice Hall: Englewood Cliffs, NJ, 1978.

*Best Little Boy in the World.* John Reid. New York, NY: Ballantine Books, 1979.

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THE STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK  
**Potsdam**

**COMING OUT**

College Counseling Center  
 State University of New York at Potsdam  
 131 Van Housen Hall  
 Email: [counseling@potsdam.edu](mailto:counseling@potsdam.edu)

“Coming out” is the process through which individuals come to terms with their lesbian or gay sexual orientations. Coming out includes both learning about oneself and sharing that knowledge with others. It also involves coping with societal responses and attitudes toward homosexuality. The coming out process is very personal. It happens in different ways and occurs at different ages for different people. Some people are aware of their sexual identity at an early age; others arrive at this awareness only after many years. Coming out is a continuing, sometimes lifelong, process. While some anxiety related to sexuality is common among college students, the problems facing gays are often more difficult than those facing others. Because positive role models are often difficult to identify, gay people may feel alone and unsure of their own sexual identities. Also, fears of rejection may be greater among lesbians and gay men due to prejudice in society against homosexuality.

### **Coming Out to Oneself**

Recognition of one’s own sexual identity and working toward self-acceptance are the first steps in coming out. Focusing on the positive aspects of being gay as opposed to focusing on the discrimination, fears, and myths about gays in society is necessary for self-acceptance. This is not to pretend that such discrimination does not have any effect on lesbians and gay men. However, this injustice can more accurately be understood as external to rather than inherent in gay sexuality. There are many things to think about when considering coming out. Some of the positive outcomes may be increased self-esteem, greater honesty in one's life and a sense of greater personal integrity. In

addition, there is often a release of tension when people stop trying to deny or hide such an important part of their lives. This can lead to greater freedom of self-expression.

One safe means of beginning to come out to oneself is through reading about how others have dealt with similar issues. There are hundreds of books and periodicals available on all facets of gay life, from clinical studies on homosexuality to collections of "coming out" stories.

### **Coming Out to Other Lesbians and Gay Men**

After spending some time getting in touch with one's own feelings, the next step often is coming out to others. It is usually advisable to come out first to those who are most likely to be supportive.

Lesbians and gay men are a potential natural support system because they have all experienced at least some of the steps in the process of coming out. Sharing experiences about being gay can decrease feelings of isolation and can be an important benefit of coming out. Within the gay community there are a number of helpful resources. These include coming out groups, switchboards, social outlets, political and cultural activities and organizations.

Coming out to other lesbians or gay men does not need to happen quickly. Choosing to do so also does not mean that individuals must conform to real or presumed expectations of the gay community. What is most important is that lesbians and gay men seek their own paths through the process and attend to their unique personal timetables. Individuals should not allow themselves to be pressured into anything they are not ready for or don't want to do. They should proceed at their own pace, being honest with themselves and taking time to discover whom they really are.

### **Coming Out to Non-Gays**

Perhaps the most difficult step in coming out is revealing oneself to non-gays. It is at this step that individuals are most likely to encounter negative consequences.

Thus it is particularly important to go into this part of the coming out process with open eyes. Non-gays may be shocked, confused and may even reject a friend or family member who comes out to them. Loss of employment or housing are also possibilities that lesbians and gay men face. In some places, even the most private expressions of sexuality between gays are illegal.

Coming out to others is likely to be a more positive experience when individuals are clear about their own feelings and thus less reliant on others for their positive self-image. Since this process of clarification of feelings takes place over time, it is usually not a good idea to come out on the spur of the moment. The process of coming out is likely to be more successful as an action, not as a reaction. In coming out to others, consider the following:

- Think about what you want to say and choose the time and place carefully.
- Be aware of what the other person is going through. The best time for you might not be the best time for someone else.
- Present yourself honestly and remind the other person that you are the same individual you were yesterday.