

Coming Out

The coming out process varies from person to person. For some it is a very easy process. There will be students in your halls who were out in high school or who might have been waiting to enter college to come out. For others, the coming out process is a long and emotionally draining process. These students will need support and the knowledge that you will be there for them throughout their coming out process.

What are available support systems for advisees who are coming out?

As an advisor, the best way to show support is to listen and to direct your residents to campus resources (please see the LGBT resources and services section).

The LGBT Center has a multitude of resources about LGBT issues and challenges LGBT students encounter. If there is anything that you are unsure of or would like more information about, I am always available to meet with you to discuss your advisees' needs.

Included are handouts about the developmental coming out process, feelings your advisees may be experiencing during the coming out process, and information on what to do when someone close to you comes out.

When an advisee comes out, how can we help their roommate understand the coming out process? What do we do if the roommate is not understanding? How do we mediate this process?

Please see the "Suggested Roommate Intervention Strategy," enclosed in this packet.

You want to treat this as a serious roommate conflict and address it in many of the same ways you would address other roommate conflicts (with mediation skills, listening, and conflict management). LGBT issues should not be the reason for a roommate change. The situation provides an educational opportunity for all parties involved, and should be worked through accordingly.

It is essential that you ensure the safety and well being of the LGBT roommate. If for any reason it seems the advisee may not be safe staying in the room, please look at other temporary and possibly permanent options.

You can always contact the LGBT Center to talk through any potential roommate conflicts or problems in your residential college.

What issues do students of color have when they come out that may differ from white students?

LGBT students of color sometimes have different experiences when coming out, in comparison to their white peers. Some potential differences or challenges:

Pressure: There is a lot of pressure by friends, families, and communities to be straight. This is often found in white communities, as well, but the effects of being rejected by one's ethnic community has much larger implications and personal pain.

Pre-Defined Sexuality and Gender: In many communities there are often very strictly defined roles that men and women are supposed to play, as well as defined ways to present themselves (i.e. very masculine or very feminine). When students defy these roles, they have the potential of being mocked or even shunned.

Choosing Allegiances: A lot of LGBT students of color who are active in and identify strongly with their ethnic community, often feel a great deal of pressure to choose between their ethnic community and the LGBT community. For example, a Latino gay male may feel he must choose between the Pride Alliance and the Chicano Caucus. Even if no one is verbally pressuring him, the lack of inclusion in both organizations and both communities, may make him feel the pressure to choose/make his one allegiance. This is echoed by many LGBT students of color.

Language: In some cultures there is no language to describe homosexuality. With no verbal construct to describe oneself, it makes it challenging for students who are coming out to their families back home.

Culture: For many international students, their home countries may reject homosexuality or even consider it illegal.

Role Models: The visible LGBT community is often very white, and LGBT students of color have harder time locating role models who resemble them entirely. For families who only see white people in the media, sometimes believe that being LGBT only exists in the white community, and use this belief to invalidate their children's identity and experience.

It must be noted that coming out is challenging for all people, regardless of race, and that some LGBT students of color do not feel affected any more than their white counterparts. This is all dependent on the cultures and communities in which they grew up and often is directly tied to privilege.

The number of LGBT of color organizations and resources has drastically increased in the last five years both in America and internationally. If you or an advisee wants more information about any group (i.e. black lesbians in America, Indian LGBT communities world wide, gay bars in Costa Rica, LGBT Muslim organizations, etc.) call, email, or stop by the LGBT Center.

Issues Around Coming Out as Lesbian, Gay, or Bisexual

The term “coming out” (of the closet) refers to the process of developing a positive lesbian, gay, or bisexual identity. It is a long and difficult struggle for many LGB individuals because they often have to confront the homophobia and biphobia they learned growing up. Before they can feel good about who they are, they have to challenge their own negative attitudes. It often takes years of painful work to develop a positive lesbian, gay, or bisexual identity. Then LGB individuals need to decide when and to whom they will disclose their sexual identity. At times, they are afraid to come out to their friends, family, and coworkers.

What might they be afraid of?

- losing friendships and family connections
- losing closeness in relationships
- being the subject of gossip
- being harassed
- being physically assaulted
- losing financial support from family members
- being thrown out of the house
- losing their job
- losing their children

Why might lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals want to come out to others?

- to end the secrecy
- to feel closer to those people
- to be able to be “whole” around them
- to stop wasting energy by hiding an essential part of themselves
- to feel like they have integrity
- to make a statement that “gay is OK”

How might lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals feel about coming out to someone?

- scared
- vulnerable
- relieved
- concerned about how the person will react
- proud

What might lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals want from the people they come out to?

- acceptance
- support
- understanding
- comfort

- a closer relationship
- hearing that disclosure will not negatively affect the relationship
- an acknowledgement of their feelings

What are some situations in which someone might come out to you?

- They may have chosen to come out to you because you are a close friend or family member and they want to have an honest and genuine relationship with you.
- They may feel that you are a person who will be understanding and accepting, and so trust you with this very personal information.
- They may not be sure how you will react, but they prefer to be honest and are tired of putting time and energy into hiding their identity.
- They may decide to come out to you before they really know you, in order to establish an honest relationship from the beginning.
- They may come out to you because some aspect of your professional relationship makes it difficult to continue to hide their sexual orientation.
- They may come out to you because you are in a position to assist them with a concern, determine their access to certain resources, or address policies which affect their life.

Ways that you can help when someone comes out to you:

Remember that the person has not changed. They are still the same person you knew; you just have more information about them now than you did before. If you are shocked, don't let the shock lead you to view the person as suddenly different.

Don't ask questions that would have been considered inappropriate before their disclosure.

If you would like more information, ask in an honest and considerate way. If you show a genuine and respectful interest in their life, they will most likely appreciate it. Some good questions to ask are:

- How long have you known that you are LGB?
- Has it been hard for you having to hide your sexual identity?
- Is there some way that I can help you?
- Have I ever offended you unknowingly?

- Don't assume that you know what it means for the person to be lesbian, gay, or bisexual. Every person's experience is different.
- They may not want you to do anything necessarily. They may just need someone to listen.
- Feel honored that they have trusted you with this very personal information.
- Clarify with them what level of confidentiality they expect from you. They may not want you tell anyone else, or they may be out to others and not be concerned with who finds out.
- If you don't understand something or have questions, remember that people who are lesbian, gay, or bisexual are often willing to help you understand their life experiences.

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