



Coming Out

LIVING AUTHENTICALLY

as **Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual+**



HUMAN
RIGHTS
CAMPAIGN
FOUNDATION

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Introduction

No matter who we are or whom we love, we all deserve the right to live out our lives genuinely, completely and honestly.

COMING OUT IS A PERSONAL CHOICE

While some people are attracted only to people of the gender different from them (commonly known as being *straight*), others may be attracted to people of genders that are similar to theirs, or to more than one gender. We use many words to describe non-straight attraction — lesbian, gay, bisexual, pansexual, queer and fluid are all commonly used labels.

Every day, each and every one of us makes deeply personal decisions about how open we want to be with ourselves and with others about our non-straight sexuality, to whom we want to open up to, and when and where we want to open up to them. In the U.S., this process is commonly known as *coming out*, and it varies drastically from person to person.

Each of us comes out 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 whether, how, where, when and with whom you choose to be open.

This resource was designed to help you and your loved ones through the coming out 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 paralyzing fear to unbounded euphoria.

We hope this resource 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 LGBTQ community. HRC offers other resources beyond this general one, including materials specifically designed for [transgender and non-binary people](#), [Bi+ people](#), [Black LGBTQ people](#), [Latinx LGBTQ people](#), [Asian and Pacific Islander LGBTQ people](#), and [allies](#). Visit hrc.org/comingout for additional information.

What Does It Mean To Be Lesbian, Gay or Bisexual+



Non-straight people may identify themselves in a myriad of ways. While terminology for many identities can differ over time and across communities, the following definitions are a good starting point.

Lesbian: A woman who is emotionally, romantically or sexually attracted to other women. Women and non-binary people may use this term to describe themselves.

Gay: A person who is emotionally, romantically or sexually attracted to members of the same gender. Men, women and non-binary people may use this term to describe themselves.

Bisexual: A person emotionally, romantically or sexually attracted to more than one sex, gender or gender identity, though not necessarily simultaneously, in the same way or to the same degree. This is sometimes written as *bisexual+* or *bi+* to incorporate many non-monosexual identities, such as pansexual, fluid or queer. At least 62% of LGBTQ adults identify as bisexual, according to the HRC Foundation's analysis of General Social Survey [data](#).

Queer: A term people often use to express a spectrum of identities and orientations that are counter to the mainstream. Queer is often used as a catch-all to include many people, including those who do not identify as exclusively straight, and/or folks who have non-binary or gender-expansive identities. This term was previously used as a slur, but has been reclaimed by many parts of the LGBTQ movement.

Monosexual: Describes someone who has the potential for emotional, romantic or sexual attraction to people of only one gender.

Pansexual: Describes someone who has the potential for emotional, romantic or sexual attraction to people of any gender, though not necessarily simultaneously, in the same way or to the same degree.

Fluid: A term people often use to describe their sexual orientation if their orientation changes with time, or if their orientation has the potential to change with time.

Keep in mind that even if one label (or more than one label) speaks to you, you are not stuck with that label forever. As humans, we learn about ourselves and grow throughout our entire lives, and we may later find that a certain label doesn't fit us as well as it once did. It is ok if one day you wake up and realize that you're not exactly who you thought you were.

Know that you, and only you, are in charge of your own identity, and you alone have the freedom to define yourself.

A Note on Terminology

In this report, we use the term "LGB+" as an umbrella term for identities that are non-straight, such as lesbian, gay and bisexual+. While there are a multitude of sexual orientations which people may feel best describe themselves, we use "LGB+" in this report as shorthand.



Being Open With Yourself



From birth, most of us are raised to think of ourselves as fitting into a certain mold.

Our culture, and often our families, teach us that we are “supposed to” be attracted to certain people and look, act and carry ourselves in specific ways. Few of us are told that we might have a sexual orientation that differs from straightness, or that we might feel compelled to express ourselves in ways that aren’t traditionally associated with our sexual orientation.

There is no one moment when it's “right” to be open about your own sexuality. Some LGB+ people have long struggled to live the lives they think they’re supposed to live, instead of the lives they know they were meant to live. Some come to question or recognize their sexualities suddenly and immediately take action. Others take more time.

We realize who we are throughout all stages of our lives — when we’re children or teens, seniors, married, single, with children or without. There is no wrong time in your life to be who you are.

When you’re ready, no matter when that is, we will be here for you.

Deciding To Tell Others

Disclosure of your LGB+ identity to others can be both critical and stressful. Some LGB+ people may feel little need to disclose themselves, while others feel the desire to tell people as soon as they realize it themselves. Both of these timelines, and everything in between, are valid.

Given the vast diversity of LGB+ people, there's no single rule to be applied as to whether a person should (or can safely) disclose their identity to others. Throughout the self-disclosure process, it's common to feel:

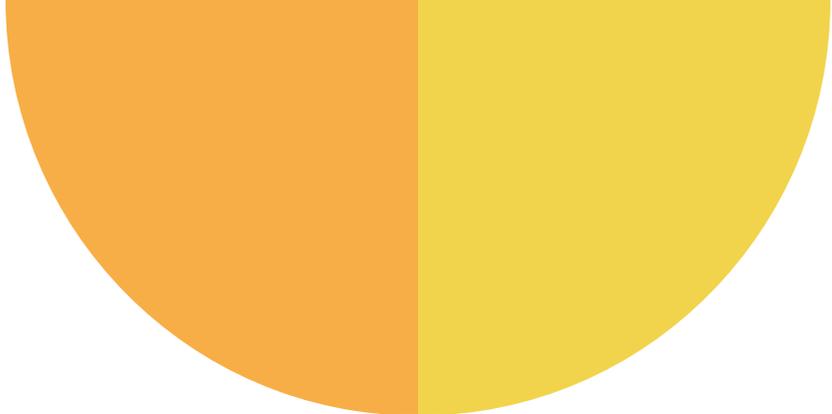
Scared · Unsafe · Confused · Guilty

Empowered · Exhilarated · Proud

Uncertain · Brave · Affirmed · Relieved

All of these feelings, and others, are normal, no matter the intensity or duration. Disclosure can be a complicated process. What's important is to check in with yourself and the emotions you are having along every step of the way.





Making a Disclosure Plan

When you're ready to tell that first person — or even those first few people — we recommend giving yourself time to prepare.

It can help to think through your options and make a deliberate plan of whom to approach, the right time to do so and how to do it. You can also consider asking yourself the following questions:

Do I know what I want to say?

Many people are still answering tough questions for themselves and are not ready to identify as LGB+, especially at the beginning of the disclosure or coming out process. Others may know they are LGB+ without knowing exactly what that means to themselves or to others. That's ok. Maybe you just want to tell someone that you're starting to ask yourself these questions. Even if you don't yet have all the answers, your feelings and your safety are what matter. To work out what you want to communicate, try writing it down.

Who should I tell first?

Who you disclose to first can be a critical decision. You may want to select people who you suspect will be most supportive, as their support can help you share with others. Consider who might be your champion — is it a close friend or colleague, your favorite teacher or professor, a parent or sibling, or another trusted person in your life? Also, know that

this kind of news can travel quickly. If you'd prefer that people keep your news confidential, be sure to tell them so. It's also important to plan for the chance that someone, intentionally or not, may share your news with others before you have the chance to do so yourself. That being said, don't be discouraged. Set the boundaries that make the most sense to you and try to do things at your own pace, no matter what that pace may be.

What kinds of signals am I getting?

Sometimes you can get a sense of how accepting people will be by the things they say. You may notice the way people talk about bisexual characters in movies or TV shows, or they may share their involvement in LGBTQ rights organizations with you. While these signs are important and encouraging, remember that some people may not react in the way that you expect. The most LGBTQ-friendly person in the office may react negatively, while the person who said something insensitive about gay people might end up being your strongest supporter. Be sure to keep an open mind, and gravitate toward those who support you — especially those doing so with open arms and no qualms.

Am I well-informed and willing to answer questions?

People's reactions to the news that you're LGB+ can depend largely on how much information they have about LGB+ issues and how much they feel they can ask. If you're well-informed, open to answering questions, and

feel comfortable and safe doing so, it can go a long way toward helping others understand. If you prefer to just send a couple articles or books to people in your life, that's ok too. See the end of this resource for ideas.

Is this a good time?

Timing is key, and choosing the right time is up to you. Be aware of the mood, priorities, stresses and problems of those to whom you would like to come out. If they're dealing with their own major life concerns, they may not be able to respond to your disclosure constructively. That being said, sometimes it may never feel like the right time to come out. Come out when it feels best for you and when the person you are coming out to is in a position to receive that information.

Can I be patient?

Just as it may have taken you time to come to terms with being LGB+, some people will need time to think things over after you disclose that news to them. The reason you've chosen to be open with these people is that you care about them or that you found it necessary. If they react strongly, it's probably because they care about you, too. Be prepared to give them space and time to adjust. Many LGB+ people who disclose their identities without expectations of immediate understanding and who establish an ongoing dialogue find that people who were initially unsupportive can become their strongest allies.



Is it safe to disclose?

If you have any doubt at all as to your safety, carefully weigh your risks and options for disclosure. LGB+ people face the real threat of harassment and violence that can be fatal. Knowing this, some LGB+ people choose to disclose being LGB+ in a safe space with friends by their sides. Also, remember that the law does not always explicitly protect LGB+ people from discrimination based on sexual orientation. Be mindful of this as you begin to share more with those around you.

What do I do if someone reacts badly?

Not everyone will react positively. This is an unfortunate fact of being LGB+. Our world is changing, but not everyone is there yet. Just as when you change careers, change religions or move to a different city, you may lose friends when you disclose — and they may not be the ones you expected. What's important is that you know your truth, and that you don't let other peoples' uninformed opinions direct your own narrative. You know who you are, and that is enough. It will be hard, but many more people will accept you than you may expect. Focus your energy on them because they are the ones that are worth it.

Having the Conversation



It's common to want or hope for positive reactions from the people you tell, but that may not happen immediately. It might help to try to put yourself in their shoes and anticipate their likely reactions, potential questions and next steps.

The person to whom you disclose your sexual orientation might feel:

**Surprised · Honored · Uncomfortable
Scared · Unsure how to react · Distrusting
Supportive · Skeptical · Relieved · Curious
Confused · Angry · Uncertain what to do next**

You may want to verbalize the range of feelings they might be having and reassure them that it's ok to ask questions. People will generally take their cues from you as to how they should approach things, so if you're open and honest, you're more likely to get openness and honesty in return. That said, reactions vary and no one is entitled to make you feel bad about your sexual orientation. Maintain awareness of your own feelings and make a plan for how to process a wide variety of responses. If someone to whom you come out has a reaction that makes you feel negatively, consider letting them know that they hurt you. Always remember that you deserve to be treated with dignity and respect.

It's also important to keep in mind that people may vary in their knowledge of LGB+ people. Some people may already be experts on LGB+ identities, some may have deep misconceptions, and others may not even know what those letters stand for. Additionally, information available about

LGB+ people can be misleading and inaccurate. While you cannot control others' level of education when you come out, you may want to provide them with factual resources that point them in the right direction. See the end of this resource for ideas.

Telling Parents and Caregivers

Regardless of your age, you may be afraid your parents or caregivers will reject you if you tell them you are LGB+. The good news is that many parents and caregivers are able to come to a place of understanding. Though some may never quite get it, others may surprise you by becoming advocates themselves. However, if you are under age 18 or financially dependent on your parents or caregivers, the decision to disclose should be made very carefully.

Supportive or not, your parents' or caregivers' initial feelings may not reflect their feelings over the long term. Keep in mind that this is big news and there's no timetable for how long it takes to adjust.

When you disclose your sexual orientation to your parents or caregivers, they may:

Embrace you with open arms and surprise you by knowing more about LGB+ people than you expected.

React in ways that hurt, such as crying, getting angry or feeling embarrassed.

Need to grieve over the dreams they've had for you before they see the new, more genuine life you are building for yourself.

Ask where they "went wrong" or if they did something to "cause this." Assure them they did nothing wrong and didn't cause you to be LGB+. You can also let them know that there is nothing wrong with being LGB+.

Think of being LGB+ as a sin, or attempt to send you to a counselor or therapist in hopes they can "change" you.

Already know or have an inkling that you are LGB+.

Feel a sense of relief.

Telling Partners and Spouses

One reason that LGB+ people may not disclose being LGB+ is the fear of how partners or spouses will react. Before disclosing to a partner or spouse, it's important to remember that they may need time and patience — just as you'd expect time and patience while working through your own feelings. Counseling can be helpful to many relationships, as can talking with other people who have been through similar situations.

At the end of the day, things may not work out between you and your partner(s) or spouse after you come out to them. Just remember that this does not mean anything is wrong with you. Every relationship has a different dynamic and different needs, and sometimes people's lives move in different directions. Although this can be a difficult situation to deal with, your sexual orientation will forever and always remain valid.

Telling Your Children

There's no one right or wrong way to have this conversation. Coming out to your children can seem a daunting task. Depending on their ages, you may be worried about them rejecting you or about their safety at school if they tell friends.

If you have a co-parent, you may want to have the conversation together, if that's possible. Or you might find that bringing a grandparent or other supportive family member into the conversation is a good idea. Your



children may have questions that they feel more comfortable asking someone else for fear of hurting your feelings. Older children, especially, may need more time to think about the news you've shared with them before they're ready to talk.

It may be helpful to arrange a family counseling session to sort through feelings. Giving your children the ability to talk to other children of LGB+ parents can be enormously helpful. Regardless of how the situation proceeds, it is important to remain open and honest throughout this process and have faith that your children will understand.

For Family and Friends of LGB+ People

If your family member or friend has come out to you as LGB+, you may be wondering how to respond. Everyone does so differently. You might be confused and have questions, relieved to know what's been on your loved one's mind, or hurt they didn't tell you sooner. You may feel a mixture of all three of these emotions, or many others. You may not even understand what it is that you're feeling.

Regardless of how you're feeling, it's helpful if you can reassure your family member or friend that your feelings for them have not suddenly disappeared. Let them know you will try your best to support them. It's ok to tell them it's going to take some time to adjust. In the end, knowing that you still care is what matters most to your friend or family member.

If you have questions for your family member or friend, first ask if they are open to answering questions. While many people will be, not all may want to do so. If they indicate that they are open to questions, be respectful. Recognize that your LGB+ loved ones are not your dictionaries and do your part to educate yourself. Don't ask them to speak for an entire community of diverse experiences and perspectives. Many of the answers you are looking for can be found in a range of books, documentaries, websites and support groups — both online and in many cities and towns across the country. See the end of this resource for ideas.

Statistical Snapshot

The Human Rights Campaign Foundation conducts vast amounts of data collection and analysis about LGBTQ people. Here is a brief snapshot of some current statistical information about LGBTQ people:

- Nearly two-thirds (62%) of LGBTQ adults identify as bisexual — that's at least 9 million people.
- The HRC Foundation has tracked progress around the acceptance of non-straight sexual orientations for nearly 40 years. Our analysis shows that while 84% of U.S. adults in 1976 said that same-sex sex is wrong, that number declined to 70% in 2004 and then to less than a majority (42%) in 2018.
- The HRC Foundation's analysis of roughly three decades of GSS public opinion data shows that while only 12% of U.S. adults supported same-sex marriage in 1988, support surpassed a majority (57%) in 2014 and continued to grow to 68% in 2018.



What Next?



Much mass media depicts coming out to the world as the “happily ever after” of the LGB+ story, but the truth is, life doesn’t end after coming out — it’s just the beginning.

After you’ve come out to others, you may feel lighter, heavier, happier, angrier, many of these emotions or none at all. Life will continue to be complex and not all of your problems will be solved. But you will be one step closer to being yourself.

While this resource is primarily for LGB+ people who are in the early stages of self-discovery, many confront the issue of coming out again and again, among new friends, family and co-workers. Some LGB+ people may not disclose their sexual orientation to many people at all, while others find that being more open about their lives and stories can be safe and affirming. Some even choose to speak out publicly about being LGB+, becoming advocates by sharing their stories in media interviews or by speaking to students at local colleges and universities or to business and community groups.

No matter the level of outness you would like to maintain, the choice is unequivocally yours. You can also shift your level of openness over time, depending on your comfort level. The journey is completely your own, and your choices ultimately belong to you. Your primary responsibility is to take care of yourself — so make the choices that will keep you healthy and at peace.

Glossary of Terms



Ally - A term used to describe someone who is actively supportive of LGBTQ people. It encompasses straight and cisgender allies, as well as those within the LGBTQ community who support each other (e.g., a lesbian who is an ally to the bisexual+ community).

Asexual - Describes a person who experiences little or no attraction to anyone, and/or does not experience desire for sexual contact.

Biphobia - The fear and hatred of, or discomfort with, people who love and are sexually attracted to more than one gender.

Bisexual - A person emotionally, romantically or sexually attracted to more than one sex, gender or gender identity, though not necessarily simultaneously, in the same way or to the same degree. This is sometimes written as bisexual+ or bi+ to incorporate many non-monosexual identities, such as pansexual, fluid or queer. At least 62% of LGBTQ adults identify as bisexual, according to the HRC Foundation's analysis of General Social Survey data.

Fluid - A term people often use to describe their sexual orientation if their orientation changes with time, or if their orientation has the potential to change with time.

Gay - A person who is emotionally, romantically or sexually attracted to members of the same gender. Men, women and non-binary people may use this term to describe themselves.

Gender-expansive - Conveys a wider, more flexible range of gender identity and/or expression than typically associated with the binary gender system. Often used as an umbrella term when referring to young people still exploring the possibilities of their gender identities.

Gender identity - One's innermost concept of self as man, woman, a blend of both or neither – how individuals perceive themselves and what they call themselves. One's gender identity can be the same or different from their sex assigned at birth. For more information on gender identity, visit our [Transgender and Non-Binary Coming Out Resource](#).

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

Intersex - An umbrella term used to describe a wide range of natural biological variations that differ from those classically thought to be typical to either men or women. In some cases these traits are visible at birth, while in others they are not apparent until puberty. Some chromosomal variations of this type may not be physically apparent at all.

Lesbian - A woman who is emotionally, romantically or sexually attracted to other women. Women and non-binary people may use this term to describe themselves.

LGBTQ - Stands for "lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer." Many people and organizations use "LGBTQ" as a catch-all term

for the non-cisgender and non-straight community, but the acronym varies depending on culture and style. For example, some groups may add “I” for intersex.

Monosexual - Describes someone who has the potential for emotional, romantic or sexual attraction to people of only one gender.

Pansexual - Describes someone who has the potential for emotional, romantic or sexual attraction to people of any gender, though not necessarily simultaneously, in the same way or to the same degree.

Queer - A term people often use to express a spectrum of identities and orientations that are counter to the mainstream. Queer is often used as a catch-all to include many people, including those who do not identify as exclusively straight and/or folks who have non-binary or gender-expansive identities. This term was previously used as a slur, but has been reclaimed by many parts of the LGBTQ movement.

Same-gender loving - A term some prefer to use to express attraction to and love of people of the same gender.

Sexual orientation - An inherent or immutable enduring emotional, romantic or sexual attraction to other people. Note: an individual’s sexual orientation is independent of their gender identity.



Additional Resources

- [Transgender and Non-Binary Coming Out Resource](#)
- [Being an LGBTQ Ally](#)
- [Black LGBTQ Coming Out Resource](#)
- [Asian and Pacific Islander LGBTQ Coming Out Resource](#)
- [Latinx LGBTQ Coming Out Resource](#)
- [Bi+ Coming Out Resource](#)

National LGBTQ Organizations

[American Veterans for Equal Rights](#)

[Bisexual Resource Center](#)

[Bisexual Organizing Project](#)

[Family Equality Council](#)

[Gay & Lesbian Medical Association](#)

[Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network](#)

[Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation](#)

[Gay and Lesbian Victory Fund](#)

[Immigration Equality](#)

[Lambda Legal](#)

[National Black Justice Coalition](#)

[National Center for Lesbian Rights](#)

[National Center for Transgender Equality](#)

[National Gay and Lesbian Task Force](#)

[National Minority AIDS Council](#)

[National Queer Asian Pacific Islander Alliance](#)

[PFLAG National](#)

[Straight For Equality](#)

[Still Bisexual](#)

[Straight Spouse Network](#)

[The Trevor Project](#)

Religiously-Affiliated LGBTQ Organizations

[Affirmation: LGBTQ Mormons, Family and Friends](#)

[Affirmation \(United Methodist\)](#)

[Association of Welcoming & Affirming Baptists](#)

[DignityUSA \(Catholic\)](#)

[Emergence International \(Christian Scientist\)](#)

[The Evangelical Network](#)

[Gay Buddhist Fellowship](#)

[Integrity USA \(Episcopalian\)](#)

[More Light Presbyterians](#)

[Muslims for Progressive Values](#)

[Rainbow Baptists](#)

[Reconciling Works \(Lutheran\)](#)

[Seventh-Day Adventist Kinship International](#)

[Unitarian Universalists Association Office of Bisexual, Gay, Lesbian, and Transgender Concerns](#)

[United Church of Christ LGBT Ministries](#)

[Metropolitan Community Churches](#)

[Unity Fellowship Church Movement](#)

[The World Congress: Keshet Ga'avah \(Jewish\)](#)

Hotlines

[The Trevor Helpline](#)
866-4-U-TREVOR (866-488-7386)

[National Suicide Prevention Lifeline](#)
(online chat available)
(800) 273-8255

[The Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender National Hotline:](#)
(888) 843-4564

[The GLBT National Youth Talkline](#)
(youth serving youth through age 25)
(800) 246-7743

[Crisis Text Line](#)
Text START to 741-741

[Trans Lifeline](#)
(877) 565-8860

[State HIV & AIDS Hotlines](#)

About the Human Rights Campaign Foundation

The Human Rights Campaign Foundation improves the lives of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ) people by working to increase understanding and encourage the adoption of LGBTQ-inclusive policies and practices. We build support for LGBTQ people among families and friends, co-workers and employers, pastors and parishioners, doctors and teachers, neighbors, and the general public. Through our programs and projects, we are enhancing the lived experiences of LGBTQ people and their families, as we change hearts and minds across America and around the globe. The HRC Foundation is a nonprofit, tax-exempt 501(c)(3) organization.

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