

Coming Out – Support for BGLTQ students

“Coming out” is a popular way of referring to the process of understanding your sexual orientation and then sharing it with other people. When people think of “coming out” they often imagine one dramatic moment, in which they share their sexual orientation with everyone in their lives.

In reality, coming out is a process that starts inside of you. Perhaps it began with a vague sense that something about you was different. Like heterosexual people, gay, bi, and queer people become aware of their sexual orientation at different times. Some people remember knowing they were gay or bi from a young age, while others are still unsure in early adulthood. There isn’t a fixed timeframe for discovering and understanding sexual orientation. It’s different for everyone.

I just mentioned that the coming out process starts inside of you. Feelings of excitement, arousal and curiosity are normal, but the coming out process sometimes triggers feelings of guilt, shame, and confusion. Some people feel frustrated during the coming out process, and look for ways to avoid thinking about it. You may worry that others will judge you because of your sexual orientation, or that your family or religious community may disapprove.

Early in the coming out process, it’s not unusual for gay and bi or queer people themselves to have strong, negative feelings about their sexual orientation, or about other gay people. This feeling is often referred to as internalized homophobia. Homophobia is an irrational fear or discomfort with homosexuality. Just like the name implies, internalized homophobia is fear or discomfort with the idea of homosexuality in ourselves.

To overcome internalized homophobia, and to feel more comfortable with your own sexual orientation, it is sometimes helpful to find other gay people and supportive straight allies. **Counseling and Mental Health Services (CAMHS) at Harvard can help, along with other resources where you’ll find people to talk to, such as the Bureau of Study Counsel, Peer Support groups, the Queer Student Association, the Office of BGLTQ Student Life, the Queer Resource Center, and others.** Wherever you are at Harvard, there’s a safe place to talk just a short walk away.

When you’ve developed a degree of comfort internally, you may feel motivated to tell other people about your sexual orientation. Keep in mind that when you come out to friends and peers, you may be faced with a wide range of possible reactions. People often ask questions that are tough, or impossible, to answer, like “how long have you known you’re gay?” or “when did you decide to become gay?” Don’t worry if you can’t answer all the questions you face, you don’t have to be the expert on all things gay or bi.

When you feel ready, it’s best to “come out” first to trusted friends or family members. You probably know which friends or family members may be most receptive to the news. Coming out to them first can be reassuring, and they may be able to help you later in the coming out process.

Sometimes the coming out process can be emotionally tough, and without support, some young gay, bi, and queer people become depressed. Studies have shown that as gay people, we are at much higher risk for depression than the general population, particularly as we try to deal with these questions of identity. It's important to seek mental health care if the coming out process starts to become overwhelming. Warning signs that you're feeling overwhelmed may include excessive guilt, avoiding friends, tearfulness, anger, self doubt, or a change in your sleeping, eating, or drinking habits.

For some people, labels and categories can seem restrictive. Choosing a label isn't a requirement when exploring your sexual orientation. There isn't a label that fully captures who you are. Sexual orientation is just one part of your identity. Embracing your identity can feel liberating, but choosing words to identify yourself is up to you. Coming out is a process, full of ups and downs. It's an important transition period in your life, and one that can be done on your own terms, at your own pace.

In closing, a reminder to reach out to the many supports that are available to you if you just need someone talk to about any of the issues mentioned above. Counseling and referral services offered through CAMHS are private and confidential.

This article is written by Jamie Turner, LICSW, a clinical social worker and counselor at Harvard University Health Services Counseling and Mental Health Services.