

Coming Out



Coming Out: An Overview

Sexuality, Sexual Identity or Sexual

Orientation refer to an individual's sense of who they may be romantically or sexually attracted to or desire.

Gender identity refers to an individual's sense of what their gender is in terms of masculinity, femininity, something in between or outside of a gender binary altogether.

Expression refers to an individual's way of dressing, appearing and behaving in the world. Some people express their sexuality and gender identity through these ways, while others do not.

Coming out is a process of making public an individual's identit(ies) that may not conform to societal norms of sexuality or gender. These identities may include lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer (LGBTQ) or any other sexual and/or gender identities that an individual finds important to express publicly.

Coming Out to Yourself

Many people are taught growing up that they are a boy or a girl (a man or a woman), that there are no other options, and that gender can never change. Many people are also taught growing up that not only must they desire romance and sex, but also that they must be sexually and romantically attracted to people of the other binary gender: women can only desire men, and men can only desire women.

In addition, many societies attach stigma or prejudice to people who break these social norms. Transphobia, homophobia, biphobia and other prejudices against LGBTQ+ people are often learned by many people, including those that may be considering coming out.

Challenging these ideas is often the first step in coming out to yourself. The coming out process often involves many such challenges, and typically centers on questioning or exploring one's relationship to sexuality, gender identity and sexual/gender expression. Who do I want to date? What gender(s) am I? How do I want to look? These are normal questions people often ask themselves during the process of coming out.

One safe way of beginning to come out to yourself is through reading about how others have dealt with similar experiences and feelings – the internet can be a good place to start. Seeing a therapist or medical professional can also be helpful in helping you grapple with these important questions.

Coming Out to Others

The choice of whether or not to come out to other people is an intensely personal one, and is often not a clear decision for every person. Some people become aware of their sexual or gender identities at an earlier age; some may come to that realization much later. Some people come out publicly as soon as they become aware of their identities, while other people come out to only some people and still others may never come out at all.

Many people find that coming out reduces their anxiety around hiding parts of their identity, allows them to live more freely and honestly and helps them find community in other LGBTQ+ people. However, coming out often comes with the risk of rejection, exclusion, prejudice or discrimination. Depending on an individual's different communities, relationships, employers and family situations, they may choose to be strategic about who they come out to and to what that coming out looks like.

Coming Out Strategies

It's often a good idea to have plans or strategies for coming out to a certain person or community, but those plans or strategies will be different for every person. Sometimes coming out looks like sitting down for a formal discussion, while other times it may look like casually revealing the information without much formality.

Knowing the person or community you will be coming out to is also a good idea. Have they condemned LGBTQ+ people in the past? How much do they know about LGBTQ+ people in general? Anticipating the answers to these questions can help you decide how to best come out. Coming out is a process – it often takes time for all parties to come to a mutual understanding with each other. It's important as you go through this process to try and find a balance between taking care of your emotional needs and being empathic towards the people you are coming out to.

Finding Community

Whether or not you choose to come out, many people find it helpful to find a supportive community of other people with similar feelings or experiences. Local support groups and community centers are good places to meet people face-to-face who can support you no matter where you are in your coming out process. Online communities, forums and blogs are a great place to find communities of LGBTQ+ people and allies who can support you in the ways you need, and many can be accessed while maintaining anonymity.

Some Terms & Identities

- **Lesbian:** A woman who experiences sexual and/or romantic attraction towards other women, femmes or feminine people.
- **Gay:** Someone who experiences same gender sexual or romantic attraction.
- **Bisexual:** Someone who experiences sexual and/or romantic attraction to two or more genders.
- **Asexual:** Someone who experiences little to no sexual and/or romantic attraction.
- **Queer:** Someone who doesn't conform to norms of sexuality or gender; often a political identity.
- **Trans:** An umbrella term for someone whose current gender is not the gender they were assigned at birth.
- **Nonbinary:** Someone whose gender is neither man/male nor woman/female.

Resources:

Weiland Health Initiative (brochure author)
<https://weiland.stanford.edu/>

lgbtcounseling@stanford.edu

LGBT Community Resource Center
<https://lgbt.stanford.edu/>

Counseling & Psychological Services (CAPS)
<https://vaden.stanford.edu/caps-and-wellness>

Office for Religious Life
<https://religiouslife.stanford.edu>

Diversity and First-Gen Office
<https://diversityandfirstgen.stanford.edu/>

