

"THE IMPORTANCE OF COMING OUT: TECHNIQUES FOR SUCCESS"

by

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Many research studies have shown that the single most important factor in reducing heterosexist prejudice is for people to become aware that they know a gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgendered person as a close friend or relative. Therefore, it is crucial that each of us come out publicly and proudly to as many of our relatives, friends and co-workers as we can safely do. Each individual must of course decide when it is appropriate for such coming out, but many of us are overly cautious about being open.

Those of us who have come out, and are no longer hiding the truth, know that we are able to function much more freely in our daily lives. Being in the closet is like living inside a cocoon, in a restricted life with many psychological pressures of fear and repression. Coming out is like the butterfly emerging from its cocoon, spreading its wings and flying freely.

The experience of many who come out is that they are relieved to find that their fears of negative reactions were overblown. In many cases, relatives and friends gain a new respect for the uncloseted person. People admire someone who will stand up proudly for themselves and assert their own rights. How do we, then, make coming out easier? Based on the research I have done on the status of gay people in several different countries, I can suggest the following.

LAYING THE GROUNDWORK

It is often wise to help "set the stage" by letting people know that you are opposed to prejudice in general. By stating abstractly your commitment to overcoming prejudice

according to race, sex, religion, age, disability, sexual orientation, and other factors, you let people close to you know that you consider all forms of discrimination to be improper for our society. This can be brought up whenever someone makes a homophobic, racist, anti-Semitic, or sexist remark, or whenever something on television or the media touches on prejudice.

Another possible approach, for persons with a lover, is to refer fondly to this person by name as a "close friend" whom you care deeply about. Perhaps have your family or friends meet the person. Later, when you come out publicly, they will have a specific person in mind rather than merely a stereotype. It is not necessary, or even desirable, to discuss your specific sexual practices with this person. The focus is on your emotional closeness and feelings of love, rather than on sex. It is not a good idea to have your partner present when making the declaration of your sexual inclinations.

COMING OUT TO PARENTS

The best time to come out is when you are feeling good about yourself. Coming out is best done in a calm one-on-one discussion. For coming out to parents, it might be best to tell another sympathetic relative first, so that they could help to serve as an intermediary if the parent reacts negatively. Do not tell your parents or relatives about your sexuality during an argument, at a funeral, or other sad times. Also, don't tell them just before an important family holiday celebration.

An effective approach is to say something like "I want to tell you something personal about myself, because I do not like to be dishonest and to hide. You are important to me, and I feel it is vital that we have an honest relationship based on trust

and understanding. I need your loving support. I can no longer bear the burden of lying to you."

Especially when telling a parent, it is important to emphasize the positive aspects of your upbringing, so that the parent will not feel guilty about "making you" the way you are. Emphasize your own happiness and acceptance of yourself; to express uncertainty about your orientation might encourage them to stress the need for you to "be cured" through therapy. Emphasize the deep roots of your love and attractions, and the happiness that you feel about accepting yourself for the way you are. While your attractions may not be the norm, emphasize it is what is natural for you. Repeat that you are the same person you were before you told them; you are not different from before, only more honest.

FOLLOWUP

Do not be upset about initial negative reactions. It took most of us a long time to accept our difference; so it is not realistic to expect our family and friends immediately to embrace this new information. You might want to confide your feelings to friends who have already come out, or to call any resource groups in your geographic area. You may have to repeat your positive messages several times.

It is often helpful to give the person some affirming literature, to put them in touch with groups like Parents & Friends of Lesbians And Gays (PFLAG), which has hotlines, and to take them to meetings. They may be embarrassed about bringing up the subject, so it is up to you to gently reintroduce the topic at later meetings. Do not neglect those who seem to be having a difficult time of adjusting to your new honesty, and be patient! Let them know that you care for them -- in word and in deed. Gradually,

introduce them to some of your similarly-oriented friends, in small numbers, to help break down stereotypes.

Most parents, relatives, friends and co-workers will eventually come around, and allow their natural friendship and loving feelings to reestablish themselves. Fortunately, stereotypes based on prejudice are seldom as powerful a sentiment as personal friendship and family love. People's personal connection with a sexual minority forces them to face the reality of homophobia in society, and to view the oppression of gays, lesbians, bisexuals, transgendered persons, and other sexually variant folks, in a new light. By this means, each of us can make an important contribution to overcoming prejudice, and to living a more full and honest life at the same time. Our future depends on it.